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BATTING ORDER

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NEXT ISSUE

What's better than one Major League Preview? Well, two of course. And we'll keep getting you ready for Opening Day with profiles of rookies to keep an eye on this season, including a ranking of the top 20 in the game. We'll also profile the sport's top power brokers and check in with reports from the Arizona and Cactus leagues.

ASK BA

BY J.J. COOPER

ONCE A STARTER . . .

What are the best indicators/attributes of a prospect remaining a starter throughout his career and not being converted to a reliever?

MIKE VOLBERDING, DANVILLE, CA

The easiest answer is scouts look for clean deliveries, strong frames and two secondary pitches to go with the fastball. Pitchers likely to end up in the bullpen are those who can't develop a breaking ball, or struggle to repeat their delivery and release point, or are shorter than 6 feet or have a skinny frame.

But let's take it a step further. It's an anecdotal look, but there's value in looking at past results. Let's look at the 30 pitchers from the 2009 Top 100 Prospects list still pitching in 2014. Of that group, 14 were starters last season, 10 were relievers and six bounced between the bullpen and the rotation.

If you looked deeper into the team Top 30s, you would find more prospects who ended up as relievers and fewer who stuck as starters partly because of need. Teams usually use 15 to 20 relievers at the big league level during a season, but just seven to 10 starters, so there are more big league jobs for relievers.

What turned starting pitching prospects into big league relievers? Here is how the 10 now full-time relievers ended up in the bullpen.

DANIEL BARD, RHP: Bard was wild as a starter, and couldn't maintain his mechanics.

MICHAEL YNOA, RHP: Missed most of three seasons with injuries, moved to bullpen because option clock is ticking after being added to 40-man roster before 2013 season.

NEFTALI FELIZ, RHP: Feliz started his major league career as a closer, moved to the rotation in 2012 but needed Tommy John surgery, so the Rangers moved him back.

WADE DAVIS, RHP: Davis was ineffective as a starter. As a reliever, he has posted two excellent seasons and his velocity has taken a big jump.

JORDAN WALDEN, RHP: Walden's max-effort and jump-to-the-plate delivery fits better in the 'pen than the rotation because it's near impossible to repeat 75-85 times a game.

PHILIPPE AUMONT, RHP: Aumont's cross-fire delivery never stayed in sync for long. He has walked 5.5 batters per nine innings for his career. The Mariners moved him to the bullpen the next season.

JEREMY JEFFRESS, RHP: Jeffress had a 100-mph fastball, but never demonstrated an ability to find the strike zone. He's just starting to find some semblance of fringe-average control as a 26-year-old reliever.

BRETT CECIL, LHP: A college closer, Cecil never found consistent success as a starter. Moving to the 'pen turned a fringy fastball into a tick-above-average offering.

BRIAN MATUSZ, LHP: Matusz's four-pitch approach seems better suited to starting, but he was ineffective in that role.

ADAM MILLER, RHP: Miller's career was derailed by finger problems. He missed 2008 and 2009 and has not been effective since.

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Vol. 35, No. 7

COVER PHOTO: BILL MITCHELL

FROM THE archives

APRIL 10

1990

» IN THIS ISSUE:

Rangers boast best system with 20-year-old Juan Gonzalez and "wonderfully named" catcher Ivan 'Pudge' Rodriguez."

» **ALSO:** Scout John Young creates Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities program, beginning in Los Angeles.



Crank up the hot tub and dial the time machine back 25 years to spring training 1990, when young outfielders like Juan Gonzalez, Larry Walker and Bernie Williams were attracting attention.

Two elderly gents manned the souvenir stand just beyond field No. 1 at the Yankees' minor league complex in Tampa. Business was slow, so they spent the mid-March afternoon watching minor league intrasquad games through the chain-link fence.

"You know who's going to be a good one is this Bernie Williams kid," one of the men said, sitting under a tent some 450 feet from home plate. "The other day, he hit one that knocked the mirror off that white truck right there . . . I replaced it myself."

Williams, a sleek, switch-hitting outfielder with obvious power, is the Yankees' top prospect. He had a great spring last year, and was one of the last cuts from the major league team. He finished season at Double-A Albany (.252-11-42, 26 steals). He was first assigned to Triple-A Columbus, where his game and confidence suffered. He hit .216-6-16 in 50 games before dropping down a notch.

"I think any damage done to Bernie we did ourselves, by starting him at a level he couldn't handle," said George Bradley, Yankees' vice president of scouting and player development.

But he was nearly sent to New York out of spring training, so why was Triple-A such a struggle? "If we knew we'd be experts," Bradley said. "We'd solve that problem."

PawSox eye Providence

New Pawtucket owners reveal plans for downtown ballpark

BY JOSH LEVENTHAL

For most fanbases, replacing a 73-year-old ballpark with a brand-new, state-of-the-art stadium located just six miles down the road would sound like a dream come true.

But that's not necessarily the case in Pawtucket, where the charm of McCoy Stadium outweighs any limitations it creates while watching the Triple-A Pawtucket Red Sox play. That was a philosophy held by the International League franchise's owner, Ben Mondor, who made-do at McCoy for 33 years before he died in 2010.

That era, however, is now officially over.

The sale of the team was completed in late February for a reported \$20 million to an ownership group headed by Red Sox president Larry Lucchino, Providence attorney James Skeffington and the Boston Red Sox parent company Fenway Sports Group. The bigger news of the day, however, was the new owners' plan to move the team to a new ballpark to be built in downtown Providence on the shores of the Providence River.

Despite its history and connection to the community, staying in Pawtucket is not an option, Skeffington said during a conference call with reporters. The owners hope to have the new ballpark done for the 2017 season.

"Pawtucket used to be number one in the International League in attendance. In the last five years, we've slid a little bit," Skeffington said of the PawSox, which ranked ninth in attendance in the 14-team International League with a 7,367 per-game average. "The economy is partially to blame for that, but so is the stadium and the lack of mass transit and the inability to find it off the highways. You can't get on a train to get to Pawtucket, but you can in downtown Providence."

The plan calls for the new owners to cover the estimated \$60 million cost of building the ballpark in exchange for the city to donate land for it, worth approximately \$38 million.

"We want to give our players as much as an opportunity as our competitors are giving their ballplayers," Skeffington said. "In Pawtucket, the infrastructure isn't there. It

was built in 1940 and the times have changed. Ballparks have changed."

And so have minor league team owners. The sport's success and growth over the past 20 years have made teams profitable after struggling to stay financially afloat for so many years. It has also attracted wealthy individuals looking to be a part of the game, corporate entities seeking out a new investment and major league teams wanting more control of the environment their prospects play in.

The 10-member group that now owns the PawSox—which includes former CVS CEO Tom Ryan and former Fleet Bank CEO Terry Murray—certainly fits that bill. However, Skeffington said that it does not mean they won't try and continue the community-oriented approach Mondor started.

"We envision prices for our ballpark to be as they are in Pawtucket today," he said. "That's our goal. Ben Mondor set the standard, and we're going to strive every day to honor his memory and emulate his success. We're going to do what we can to keep the costs down so families can go."

The PawSox became a staple in the community under Mondor, a local businessman who rescued the team from financial distress at the request of the Red Sox in 1977 and rebuilt it into a steady franchise. In 1999, Mondor oversaw the \$16 million renovation of McCoy Stadium, which was originally built as part of a New Deal-era Work Progress Administration project, that allowed the team to stay in Pawtucket.

McCoy Stadium became beloved by locals because of its charm—not its amenities. Dugouts are built into the grandstand walls and fans fish for autographs from players by lowering items by rope from the raised seating. And while Mondor updated the ballpark over the years, it still lacks the bells and whistles of more modern venues.

"There is no question there are limitations," International League president Randy Mobley said of McCoy Stadium. "It is just a matter of when those limitations exceed the benefits of something new or different. That perspective can change from ownership to ownership."

Bumgarner celebrates title by getting to work



Jerry Crasnick

Baseball Writer,
ESPN.com

SCOTTSDALE, ARIZ.

Rumor has it that Madison Bumgarner wakes up at 5 or 6 each morning during the offseason to tote bales of hay, tend to the horses and cows and do all the other necessary chores at his farm in Hickory, N.C. So it was a bit ironic when he completed his first throw session at Giants' spring training camp, then answered a bunch of questions about whether he's prepared to handle his upcoming workload.

It's been almost four months since Bumgarner was equal parts Randy Johnson, Terminator and Paul Bunyan in San Francisco's four-week run to a title. His amazing performance earned him the Sports Illustrated sportsman of the year award, an honor that elicits a genuine surge of emotion from him because of the elite company he now keeps. His fellow honorees include such baseball royalty as Sandy Koufax, Stan Musial, Cal Ripken Jr. and Derek Jeter.

But during all that time at home, Bumgarner never felt the urge to queue up a DVD to relive the thrill of October or bask in the glow of his performance. If his baseball excellence spawned a run of baby boys and girls named Madison in the Bay Area, he's oblivious to the phenomenon.

"We're getting a little carried away now," Bumgarner said, when the possibility came up in conversation.

Nevertheless, his stature in the clubhouse and the rotational pecking order has been cemented. While Matt Cain works his way back from elbow surgery and Tim Lincecum tries to return to prominence at age 30, Bumgarner has embraced the role of San Francisco's staff ace. Manager Bruce Bochy has all but confirmed that Bumgarner will get the Giants' Opening Day nod, although some formalities need to be addressed before it's official that Bumgarner will start San Francisco's first game at the Diamondbacks on April 6.

"I have to talk to him first," Bochy said. "I have to do things in order."

Then Bochy joked that the Giants' might have a slight problem, because Bumgarner is also scheduled to start Game Two.

The Throwback Type

Amid the rampant innings-monitoring that sends Bob Gibson, Jim Bunning and other old-timers into a tizzy these days, Bumgarner is the heartiest of throwbacks. He threw 217

innings in the regular season followed by 53 more against the Pirates, Nationals, Cardinals and Royals in October. Before Game Seven of the World Series, writers prepared to call him "heroic" if he could come out of the bullpen on two days' rest and contribute two innings against the Royals. All Bumgarner did was stroll out of the Kauffman Stadium bullpen and throw 68 pitches of two-hit, shutout ball for a five-inning save.

His final pitch—a high fastball that elicited a harmless Salvador Perez foul pop that nestled into the warm embrace of Pablo Sandoval—was his 4,074th offering of the season (not counting spring training).

If Bumgarner doesn't look back in awe over his October achievements, his teammates, San Francisco fans and the media are happy to do it for him. His run of October dominance left him with a 0.25 ERA in 36 career World Series innings and a postseason strikeout-to-walk ratio of 77-to-15—numbers that already place him in the John Smoltz-Curt Schilling stratosphere as a big-time "money pitcher."

So What's Next?

If someone is going to reverse the modern trend of pitcher-coddling, it might as well be an unassuming farm boy who stands 6-foot-5, 235 pounds. Bumgarner faced questions about his ability to handle the workload earlier in his career, and he graduated from 141 innings in 2009 to 214 innings in the minors, majors and the postseason in 2010. He was a mere 20 years old at the time.

"Too much is made of all this stuff, with pitch counts and everything else," Giants starter Jake Peavy said. "Give me a break. What do you think Nolan Ryan thinks when he hears '270 innings'? It's not like the human body can't do this. I know it's a different game now. But it's not like we're asking somebody to go walk on the moon for us."

Said Giants reliever Javier Lopez: "I look at Bum, and it's not only his body of work, but just his body in general. He's built to last, so to speak."

The operative phrase is "country strong." Bumgarner generates a lot of power from his legs and midsection, and his delivery is fluid and repeatable during times of duress.

He also gets down to business from the moment the hitter sets foot in the box. Bumgarner has averaged between 15.5 and 15.9 pitches per inning in all five of his big-league seasons, and he has improved his first-pitch-strike throwing and ranked ninth among major league starters with a 66.7 percent rate in that category in 2014.

All Systems Go

Bumgarner doesn't share many trade secrets



BILL NICHOLS

Will last season's extra workload slow down World Series hero Madison Bumgarner?

with the masses, but teammates say he's a student of the game and a self-improvement buff. After expressing a desire to contribute more at the plate, he showed up last year and hit .258 with four homers, 15 RBIs and a .755 OPS to win the NL Silver Slugger award for pitchers. This year his main objective in spring training is to command his fastball to both sides of the plate so that everything is in fine working order once the regular season begins.

The adulation and creature comforts of World Series stardom are manifested in subtle ways. Bumgarner has changed glove providers, from Rawlings to Mizuno, and he landed a Jockey underwear endorsement after an appearance with Jimmy Fallon on "The Tonight Show." But very little else will change. If there comes a time when the Giants need to back off or give him a breather, Bumgarner will give Bochy, pitching coach Dave Righetti or the training staff a heads-up and maybe they'll adjust. Until that day, there's no point in worrying about a bridge the Giants might never have to cross.

Bumgarner shows a playful side and a dry wit in interviews and clubhouse interactions with teammates, but he's so disciplined in his work habits that he channels the same focus into a late February bullpen session or a postseason game before a packed stadium and a national TV audience. It hardly matters that history, his personal legacy and the hopes of Giants fans are tied to every pitch.

"That's just the guy he is," Giants second baseman Joe Panik said. "He has that mindset of, 'I'm going to go out there every day and do the same thing.' It doesn't matter how good or bad he's pitched. His attitude is the same even with all the success. He's the same old Bum to us."

The World Series is in the past and Madison Bumgarner—the same old Bum—arrived at camp with high expectations and a willingness to work. The Giants plan to saddle up their ace and ride him as long as they can.

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Longtime FSL president Murphy dies at 83

BY JOSH LEVENTHAL

Baseball was always a family endeavor for Chuck Murphy, the longtime Florida State League president who died in February at the age of 83.

Murphy kept his family close. His late wife Emo served as his unofficial lieutenant after he landed his first baseball gig with the Evansville Triplets in 1976 following a 21-year career in the Army. Daughter Laura worked by his side in the Florida State League office, and Murphy's son-in-law Tim pitched in as the Daytona Cubs' public-address announcer. But he also opened his arms to the baseball community, so many of whom considered themselves part of Murphy's extended family.

"All of the league presidents would say they were close with Chuck, and I was not different," International League president Randy Mobley said. "He made us all feel special and feel like you were his best friend. I felt like I had a special relationship with him, but I think everybody did."

That ranges from Minor League Baseball president Pat O'Connor to the regulars Murphy encountered daily during the season at Daytona's Jackie Robinson Stadium.

Murphy's office was just beyond the right-field fence at the home of the newly renamed Daytona Tortugas, and Murphy was a regular at home games. He would stroll out of his office a couple of hours before game time, stop to chat with the grounds crew and meet with the umpires and coaching staffs before sitting down for a meal with season-ticket holders and other fans at the ballpark.

"He was a grandfatherly figure to myself, and I'm sure we had other young executives in the league who looked at him the same way," former Daytona GM Brady Ballard said.

Murphy retired from the Army in 1975 as a lieutenant colonel. He was named general manager in Evansville in 1977 before serving as vice president for the Daytona Beach Islanders from 1984-86. He briefly worked as Daytona Beach's parks manager before accepting the job as FSL president in 1990.

Murphy understood challenges his teams faced drawing fans after six weeks of spring training, but never accepted it as an excuse.

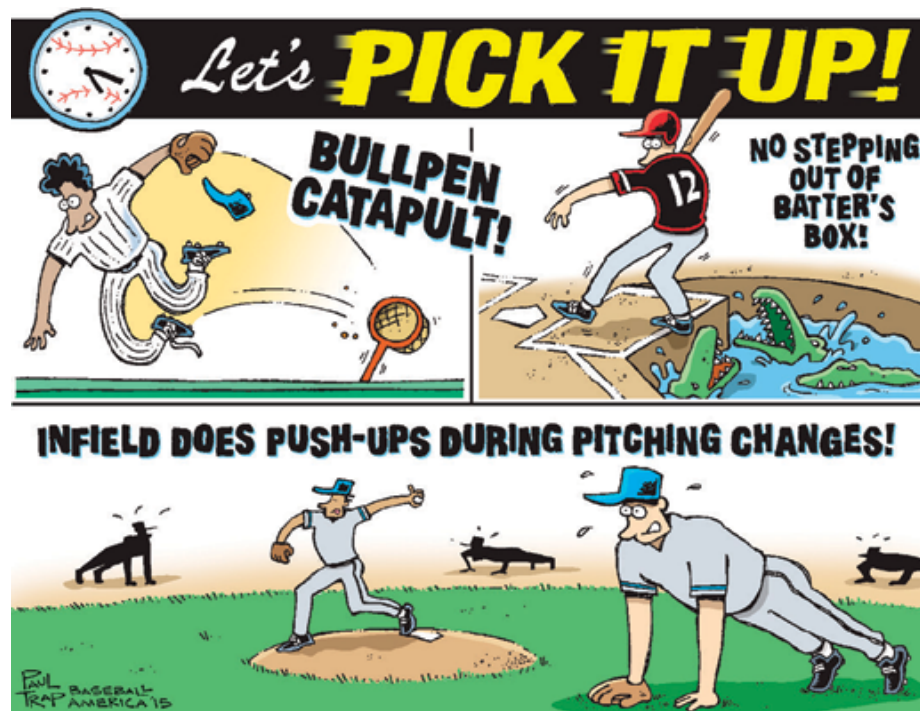
"He pushed his guys to do better," O'Connor said. "Chuck pushed professionalism, going that extra step if you have to. He knew how to do things right. He challenged guys."

And that included O'Connor. Murphy used to poke at the president, calling Minor League Baseball's headquarters in St. Petersburg "The Little Pentagon." Murphy was often the one his peers turned to for advice, and he would offer a strong but reasonable opinion.

"He was just a solid person who loved the game, loved the league," O'Connor said.

PERSPECTIVE | Paul Trap

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USA Baseball to host international players

BY JOHN MANUEL

USA Baseball's National Training Complex will be packed with high school-aged players at the end of March.

The Cary, N.C., four-field complex already plays host to the National High School Invitational, the nation's best high school baseball tournament. Now USA Baseball and Major League Baseball have created the International Prospect Series, scheduled for March 27-28, with high school-aged athletes from six countries—Aruba, Colombia, Curacao, the Dominican Republic, Panama and Venezuela—playing against two high school teams from North Carolina.

While the best players eligible to sign in this year's July 2 international signing period, for the most part, already have agreements in place, the event still is a first step of having MLB involved in a showcase type of event involving international players brought to the U.S.

With it running concurrently with the NHSI, it could set a foundation for future events that include top high school-age players, both domestic and international, playing at the same time in the same complex.

"In the years ahead, our global game will aim to develop more players—at all levels

and from all communities," commissioner Rob Manfred said in a statement. "This event promises to be a strong showcase of amateur talent in a format that can help advance the careers of many players."

MLB organizations will select the international roster, which is intended to include the top July 2, 2015, international free agents. Making that a reality is harder than just announcing it, however.

The NHSI, scheduled for March 25-28, already will include 16 teams from around the country, and now two more domestic teams will be in the area.

Cuban Team To Return To Cary

Cuba's national team, which resumed a yearly series with the USA Baseball Collegiate National Team in 2012 following a 16-year drought, will return to the United States in 2015 to play a five-game series in North Carolina in July.

USA Baseball said the series will open at the USA Baseball National Training Complex in Cary on July 1, move to Durham Bulls Athletic Park on July 2-3, Charlotte's BB&T Ballpark on July 4 and then finish back in Cary on July 6.

The U.S. last hosted the series in 2013, and Cuba played host in 2012 and 2014.

IN SHORT | PEPPER

PACE OF PLAY CHANGES COMING

Major League Baseball and the MLB Players Association agreed to changes aimed at slicing into the time of game, which has averaged longer than three hours since 2012 and has increased by more than a half-hour since 2004.

The sides decided against instituting—at least this year—the changes it experimented with in the Arizona Fall League, such as the 20-second pitch clock. However, batters will be required to keep at least one foot in the batter's box and pitching changes and between-inning breaks will also be timed. For instance, when a reliever leaves the bullpen and reaches the field, the timer will be activated—starting at 2 minutes, 25 seconds on local TV games, 2:45 on national games.

The new rules will be in place at the beginning of the season, and fines for violations will be levied starting May 1. The average time of game in the majors has risen to 3:13 in 2014 from 2:45 in 2004, according to USA Today.

Double-A and Triple-A ballparks are implementing pitch clocks this season.

TOBACCO BAN SOUGHT AT CALIFORNIA PARKS

Less than a year after the death of **Tony Gwynn** from cancer, a California lawmaker is seeking to have chewing tobacco banned at games played in the state.

The bill proposed by California state assemblyman **Tony Thurmond** would ban use of all tobacco products at baseball stadiums in the state, including dipping, chewing, smoking or using electronic or e-cigarettes.

Major League Baseball already ban smoking and the minor leagues prohibit dipping and chewing.

Gwynn died of cancer of the salivary glands, believed related to chewing or dipping tobacco.

"Tony Gwynn was somebody I thought was a spokesman for baseball, a great role model as a person," Thurmond said in a statement.

"I'm hopeful that this bill will lend to his legacy, that it will help to prevent illness for young people and young athletes."

MLB said it favors the legislation.

"We have sought a ban of its use on-field in discussions with the Major League Baseball Players Association," according to the statement.

LONGTIME UMPIRE McCLELLAND RETIRES

Tim McClelland, the umpire best known for calling out **George Brett** in the "Pine Tar Game" in 1983 against the Yankees, is retiring after 32 years.

McClelland, 63, worked more than 4,200 games. He was second among umpires in experience, behind **Joe West**, who's spent 37 years in the majors.

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Mike Trout

For Ramirez, circuitous route to Fenway



Peter Gammons

Columnist,
MLB Network

FORT MYERS, FLA.

The day Hanley Ramirez arrived here in February, he went to find an old hotel 15 years in his past.

"I wanted to go see it, because it was the first place I lived when I had signed and came to this country to begin my baseball career," Ramirez said as he worked out at the Red Sox new complex. "It was a good reminder of where I came from."

Ramirez is 31 now. He is no longer a shortstop, he is a left fielder who looks as if he were Bill Belichick's middle linebacker at 6-foot-2, 240 pounds. Not long after he arrived in Fort Myers as a teenager from the Dominican Republic, he was on the cover of *Baseball America*, a prospect thought to be so elite that he was considered a future superstar. He played in Double-A Portland in 2005 with Dustin Pedroia, Jon Lester, Brandon Moss, Anibal Sanchez, Jonathan Papelbon, David Murphy and about 10 more future major leaguers. That November he was traded to the Marlins (with Sanchez) for Josh Beckett and Mike Lowell, a trade that won a World Series in 2007 and remains a testament to Marlins general manager Larry Beinfest's remarkable judgment for talent.

There were good times in Miami, there were turbulent times. He was second in the National League MVP balloting in 2009. He had a much-televised blowup with Fredi Gonzalez, and by the trading deadline in 2012, he was sent to the Dodgers, where he was one of the game's best players until he was hit by a pitch in the NL Championship Series.

Because of the injury, he could not work out last offseason and was not the same shortstop, not one in whom the Dodgers could make a qualifying offer. He batted .283/.369/.448, but



Hanley Ramirez is back with the team that drafted him, but at a new position. "It is where I always wanted to come back to play"

his range was shortened, his power limited to 13 homers.

So he landed in free agency, where Red Sox GM Ben Cherington went after him, found him willing to move to left

field, signed him to a four-year, \$88 million contract.

"It is where I always wanted to come back to play," Ramirez says.

He made up for his previous offseason without conditioning to a program this winter that has him cut, chiseled and incredibly strong. "The sound of the ball coming off his bat is something you seldom hear," Red Sox hitting coach Chili Davis says. "He's a rare, scary talent, and he is a very intelligent hitter. In this order he could have a monster season."

That raises the question: Can he play left? Ramirez arrived early to Fort Myers and was working with coach Arnie Beyeler.

"It really helps that we have a Green Monster here," Ramirez says. "I was always pretty comfortable going back on balls. I think it will be fine. What we're really working on is charging balls and throwing. I know in a short field that being able to charge balls and come up throwing is important, because if a left fielder can do that, it's hard for runners to score from second on singles."

Without knowing how Allen Craig bounces back and how they will use Jackie Bradley, Jr., Farrell has Ramirez, Shane Victorino, Betts and Rusney Castillo for four positions.

"One of the things I like best about our team is the depth and flexibility," assistant GM Mike Hazen says.

The Red Sox were 11th in runs, eighth in on-base percentage and 14th in slugging in the American League last season, and that's with David Ortiz having a big power season. Now they have Pedroia, Napoli and Victorino healthy again; Betts looking like a premium top-of-the-order player; and Xander Bogaerts ready to pick where he left off following a big September last year.

Now add Hanley Ramirez into a hitters' division with the freedom to think bat, not shortstop.

"I want to do what will make me remembered for what I did for the Boston Red Sox," he says.

Tigers look for title, while eye is on future



Tracy Ringolsby

Columnist,
MLB.com

DENVER

The Tigers have been aggressive in recent seasons in an effort to end a 30-year championship drought. They have advanced to the postseason the last four seasons, even getting to the World Series in 2012, where they were swept by the Giants.

Is their window to win a title about to close?

The Tigers head to spring training with every reason to feel they can win the AL Central this year, but also with a roster that will force management to make tough decisions by season's end.

The Tigers have six potential free agents among their key players for 2015, plus closer Joe Nathan, who does have a club option for 2016 worth \$10 million.

The potential free-agent list includes outfielder Yoenis Cespedes, projected starting pitchers David Price and Alfredo Simon, late-inning reliever Joakim Soria, catcher Alex Avila and fourth outfielder Rajai Davis. Lefty reliever Tom Gorzelanny is also signed to a one-year deal at \$1 million.

What will be factored into decisions about re-signing any of the potential free agents is that the Tigers already have \$111.8 million committed for next year to five players—Justin Verlander (\$28 million), Miguel Cabrera (\$28 million), Victor Martinez (\$18

million), Anibal Sanchez (\$16.8 million) and Ian Kinsler (\$14 million)—plus the \$1 million buyout for Nathan, and \$6 million to the Rangers to offset Prince Fielder's contract.

Price, Avila and Cespedes are among the 10 potential free agents who will be under the spotlight this season.

ALEX AVILA, C, TIGERS (28 YEARS OLD): A lefthanded-hitter who can be a threat (50 home runs the last four years with Comerica Park as his home field), Avila has thrown out at least 30 percent of potential basestealers in four of his last five seasons, including 34 percent last year. He doesn't turn 29 until the offseason.

YOENIS CESPEDES, OF, TIGERS (29): When he defected from Cuba, the key to his signing with the A's was Oakland agreed to a four-year deal that allowed Cespedes to become an unrestricted free agent at the age of 30. He has a flair for the dramatic in the outfield.

CHRIS DAVIS, 1B ORIOLES (28): Davis opened eyes with 53 home runs and 138 RBIs two years ago, but last year he took a hit. He hit .196 with 26 home runs and 72 RBIs and missed the final 42 regular season games and seven postseason games as part of a 50-game suspension for violating baseball's drug agreement. Davis, who turns 29 in March, will have 161 games to re-establish market value.

JASON HEYWARD, OF, CARDINALS (25): Heyward was dealt by the Braves to the Cardinals in the offseason and goes into a season where he needs to reaffirm his offensive impact. After what seemed like a breakthrough 2012 season (27 home runs, 82 RBIs and .269 average), he has hit .264 with 25

home runs and 96 RBIs total over the last two seasons. Hitting primarily in the leadoff spot last year, he did show he can run the bases, succeeding on 20 of 24 stolen base attempts.

TIM Lincecum, RHP, GIANTS (30): A Cy Young Award winner in his second and third year in the majors, Lincecum was a combined 49-22 in 2008-10, but is 45-52, 4.18 since. The Giants were concerned enough last season that he was limited to just 1 2/3 innings of relief in the postseason and worked out of the bullpen in the final weeks of the regular season. He walked 315 batters in 756 innings the last four seasons.

RICK PORCELLO, RHP, RED SOX (26): Porcello was in the big leagues at age 20, and is coming off back-to-back winning seasons for the first time. In 2014 he tallied a career-best 15 wins and 3.43 ERA. Now he gets to adjust from pitching-friendly Comerica Park to the nuances of Fenway.

DAVID PRICE, LHP, TIGERS (29): A lefthander with command (2.4 walks per nine innings in his career) and durability (200-plus innings four of the last five years, including a career-best 248 1/3 last year) set a bidding bar when he signed for \$19.75 million to avoid arbitration this year. The Tigers have an investment, having given up lefty Drew Smyly, outfielder Austin Jackson and shortstop prospect Willy Adames to acquire him from the Rays.

JEFF SAMARDZIJA, RHP, WHITE SOX (30): A former receiver at Notre Dame, Samardzija has athleticism and a live arm, which is why the A's traded for him in the second half last year and the White Sox swung a deal to acquire him in the offseason. He has not, however, had that breakthrough season. He's coming off three consecutive losing seasons in which he was a combined 24-39, 3.70. He did surpass 200 innings and 200 strikeouts the last two seasons.

MATT WIETERS, C, ORIOLES (28): A year ago Wieters was the game's elite catcher. A switch-hitter with power (67 home runs,



David Price's age and durability will make him one of the most sought-after free agents

230 RBIs from 2011-13) he also has thrown out 33 percent of potential basestealers in his career. Off to the best start of his career last season, he was sidelined in May and had Tommy John surgery on his right elbow in June. His catching will be limited early, but he can DH and there's hope he can start showing his offensive potential on Opening Day.

JORDAN ZIMMERMANN, RHP, NATIONALS (28): The righthander battled injuries early in his career, but in the last three seasons he is 45-22, 2.96, working more than 195 innings in each. With the Nationals adding to their roster in the offseason, Zimmermann will be pitching for a team that is favored to win its division, which should enhance his opportunities to build a stronger resume before having a chance to test the open market.



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Matuella, Tate embody rank whims



John Manuel

Editor in Chief
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Draft lists can change quickly, and the draft doesn't happen until June. No one is drafting off offseason rankings, or February draft lists.

Fans love them, though, and Baseball America likes to do them. We did a Top 50 overall draft rankings last issue, and in this issue we bring back our Top 50 players by class.

As the editor who oversees those lists, let me say they aren't 100 percent consistent, because the players—and the perceptions of the players—can change very quickly.

Duke righthander Michael Matuella entered the spring as the top four-year college player on our list, with the caveat that Matuella had a different, shorter track record than the average college pitcher who has ranked at the top of our lists in the past. However, he's also a 6-foot-7 pitcher with a great pitcher's body who has shown a four-pitch mix that includes a fastball up to 98 mph.

He was diagnosed in the fall with a back condition, called spondylosis, and in a pre-season interview with reporters, he acknowledged that making every start this spring would be crucial for helping him surpass

Marcus Stroman as the program's highest-drafted player.

So when Duke coaches scratched Matuella's second scheduled start due to a forearm strain, red flags went up for scouts who already were wary of Matuella's medical track record. It's early, but even missing one start has dinged Matuella on draft boards.

On the other end of the country, UC Santa Barbara righty Dillon Tate is moving in the other direction from Matuella on boards. Three years ago, Tate was a solid but unspectacular prep out of Claremont (Calif.) High. As a Gauchos freshman, Tate threw just three innings in four appearances, mostly because, coach Andrew Checketts says, he couldn't get anybody out.

"We'd talked about redshirting him," Checketts remembered. "He couldn't get guys out in intersquads, but we needed him, and he had a good arm."

And yet he clearly had athleticism in his 6-foot-2, 185-pound frame, and he did get one out that year that seemed to start something. In a mid-April game against San Diego, Tate entered the game to face Kris Bryant, en route to his College Player of the Year award, and retired Bryant on a 3-2 changeup.

The arrow has pointed up for Tate just about ever since. The addition of a cutter in his sophomore season helped give him a pitch he could throw consistently for strikes, and he started finding the zone with his fastball more

frequently as well. The fastball jumped in velocity into the mid-90s last season, when he won UCSB's closer job, and the cutter began a better slider, one with late action that has become a swing-and-miss pitch.

"He was not polished, and he did not have feel for his secondary pitches when he got here," Checketts said. "But he did have a good delivery and clean arm, and natural ability. He started getting some confidence and it just has grown from there."

After saving 12 games as a sophomore and dazzling scouts out of the bullpen last summer with USA Baseball's Collegiate National Team, Tate moved into the rotation to start his junior season. It was a fairly close call for Checketts, who has to balance development and winning with a Top 25 team and a potential top 10 draft pick. He discussed the matter with Tate prior to opening week and says Tate told him winning was his priority.

So far, scouts and the Gauchos are happy. Tate has moved into a starting role and opened the season with 13 2/3 scoreless innings in a pair of victories, striking out 17 and walking just four while allowing seven hits. His fastball has reached the mid-90s consistently as a starter; his slider has been unhittable. He's located the fastball down better, which he'll have to do as it straightens out and is hittable when he leaves it up, but his changeup and cutter give him two other pitches to play off his fastball release point.



Dillon Tate has emerged—at least early this season—as a player rocketing up draft boards

Add it all up, and Tate is moving up draft boards, particularly in a year when the top of the draft is less defined than most years.

"He's trying to focus on his pitching, his running, his routine and getting better," Checketts said. "He's not a big fan of the meetings with scouts and all the hoopla."

Oh, but coach Checketts some of us are. So Dillon Tate and Michael Matuella will have to get used to the hoopla and respond to it in kind. That should make it a fun draft spring.

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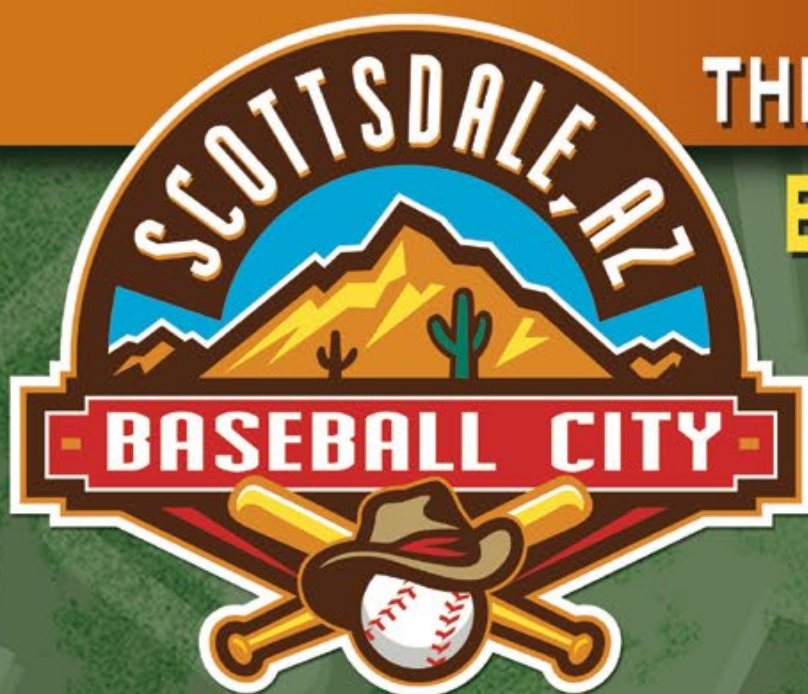
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Peering into BA's Crystal Ball

Baseball America editors tackle upcoming season's most important questions



Matt Harvey, Mets

The biggest storyline of 2015 will be?

John Manuel: **The Nationals**, who should (a) be a 100-win team, baseball's first since the Yankees in 2009, (b) have baseball's best rotation, and (c) still need to figure out which starter will go to the bullpen come playoff time.

J.J. Cooper: **The addition of the second wild card** has already added a lot of interest in markets around the country. This year it could get even more interesting because so few teams are clearly looking to next year as the season begins. Some teams will falter, but at the trade deadline, the Royals and Giants' examples from last year should inspire a lot of teams to go for it, since 87-88 wins can lead to postseason glory.

Matt Eddy: The stable of **quality position players the Red Sox have added** in the past year—Mookie Betts, Xander Bogaerts, Rusney Castillo, Yoan Moncada, Hanley Ramirez, Pablo Sandoval—could be the antidote to the game's spiking strikeout rate and depressed extra-base hit rate.

Josh Leventhal: **Year of the Pitcher, Part II.** Offense will continue to be on the decline while strikeouts stay on the rise.

Ben Badler: Steroids are still prevalent in the game. It's only a matter of time until **the next big steroid story** becomes public.

Vince Lara: Whether **the Padres' transformation** pans out. If it does, other teams—sports teams are copycats—could borrow the blueprint. If it crashes, it's the Marlins following 1997 all over again.

Josh Norris: How will the rash of **Tommy John victims** from last year fare in 2015?

Michael Lananna: **Pace of play** has been a major area of focus the last few months and should continue to be in the spotlight with the changes MLB has instituted at the major league and minor league levels. It'll be interesting to see how those measures impact the game at both levels and whether the pitch clock gains momentum after its trial in Triple-A and Double-A.

Hudson Belinsky: **Rob Manfred's challenges, and changes**, to the game, both economically and in terms of how the game on the field is played.

Which team had the most disappointing offseason?

Manuel: **The Giants** seemed to finish second to a lot of free agents, and Pablo Sandoval's loss will hurt a lot. Age and attrition seems likely to catch up to the rotation as well.

Cooper: It's not a shock that Max Scherzer left, but **the Tigers** are getting old quickly. If Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez don't return to full strength and Justin Verlander doesn't bounce back, there aren't a whole lot of Plan B's to fill those holes. The AL Central is getting more and more competitive, and the rest of the division's rising stars—like the Indians and Royals—should be able to catch the team that has dominated the division.

Eddy: Losing a Cy Young Award winner (Max Scherzer) is always tough, and **the Tigers** already appeared to be gathering speed down the other side of the mountain from their 2011-13 peak. Save for Ian Kinsler, the Tigers could get very little offense from up-the-middle positions. The back of the rotation now features Alfredo Simon and Shane Greene rather than homegrown growth assets Rick Porcello and Drew Smyly.

Leventhal: Roll out the red carpet for J.P. Arenchibia, Travis Snider and Delmon Young. Otherwise, the **Orioles'** only additions of note to one of baseball's best offenses last year come from the disabled list (Matt Wieters and Manny Machado) and restricted list (Chris Davis).

Badler: The front office may have changed, but I still don't understand what **the Diamondbacks** are doing. They inherited a quality farm system, but there's little evidence the team is improving, and the Yoan Lopez signing handcuffs them from taking advantage of the biggest international bonus pool in baseball, not just this year but likely next year as well.

Which team had the best offseason?

Manuel: San Diego had the most interesting offseason; **the Cubs** had the best. Jon Lester, Miguel Montero, Dexter Fowler and of course Joe Maddon are all huge pieces to make the team relevant in 2015, and Theo Epstein, Jed Hoyer and Co. didn't have to touch the jewels of baseball's best farm system to get them.

Cooper: It's hard not to like what **the Cubs** are doing. Adding Jon Lester is just the kind of move a team with a cost-controlled lineup should do—spend money on veteran pitching. Chicago still needs another starting pitcher before its rebuilding job is complete, and young lineups often take longer to jell than fans would like. But with the money to acquire a second big-money ace either at the trade deadline or when the offseason arrives, everything seems to be coming together for a 2016 playoff run.

Eddy: **The White Sox** added considerable upgrades at No. 2 starter (Jeff Samardzija), DH (Adam LaRoche), left field (Melky Cabrera), closer (David Robertson) and lefty matchup relief (Zach Duke). So while it may be cliched to simply reward the teams who spend the most money, the White Sox already had two of the best players in the AL in Chris Sale and Jose Abreu. Last year's first-rounder Carlos Rodon is a huge wild card.

Leventhal: Even if A.J. Preller's offseason dealing doesn't turn **the Padres** into a contender this season, he at least made the team relevant again in San Diego. And it will certainly be interesting to see what the first-year GM has in store for the trade deadline in July.

Badler: **The Padres** added impact talent without giving up many prospects they're going to regret losing. If A.J. Preller can get that franchise to the playoffs in his first season in charge, a lot of owners are going to be asking some tough questions of their own GMs.

Vince Lara: **The Nationals'** acquisition of Max Scherzer makes a formidable rotation that much deeper, but Mike Rizzo's shoe-horning into the Wil Myers deal and coming out with Joe Ross and Trea Turner is what gives the Nats the edge over the Padres.

Norris: A.J. Preller went beast mode. **The Padres** acquiring Justin Upton, Wil Myers and Matt Kemp in one offseason without giving up Matt Wisler, Hunter Renfroe or Austin Hedges? Masterwork.



Manager Bud Black (far left) will have a transformed roster in 2015

Lara: Given their pitching, **the Mets** should have struck for another outfield bat or a short-stop. Instead, they struck out.

Lananna: With several young, talented arms ready to contribute in the starting rotation and with the Phillies and Braves in full rebuilding mode, this offseason would have been the perfect time for **the Mets** to splurge on offense. Nope. They signed Michael Cuddyer.

Belinsky: Coming off a 96-win season in 2014, **the Orioles** lost Nelson Cruz and Nick Markakis, and failed to lock up their core talent to long-term extensions, meaning that next offseason could be ugly. Baltimore will rely on players with success in limited samples from last year's squad.

Lananna: A.J. Preller must have a pretty large minutes plan with how often he worked the phones this winter. Even with an anemic offense, **the Padres** sneakily had a solid second half last season. Adding Matt Kemp, Wil Myers and Justin Upton and fortifying the rotation with James Shields makes them a legitimate threat in the NL West.

Belinsky: Not only did **the Nationals** add Max Scherzer to what was already one of the best rotations in baseball, they also added depth up the middle. Yunel Escobar's team-friendly deal and ability to play shortstop gives the Nationals flexibility for the next few years. On the minor league side, Washington turned its outfield surplus into Trea Turner and Joe Ross, adding another punch to the depth of their strong farm system.



Bryce Harper, Nationals

Which player will bounce back in 2015?

Manuel: Paul Goldschmidt.
Cooper: Bryce Harper.
Buxton: Byron Buxton.
Leventhal: Prince Fielder.
Badler: Bryce Harper.
Lara: Brian McCann.
Norris: Bryce Harper.
Lananna: Justin Verlander.
Belinsky: Jean Segura.

Meet the breakout star of 2015 ...

Manuel: Christian Yelich.
Cooper: Mookie Betts.
Eddy: Mookie Betts.
Leventhal: Rusney Castillo.
Badler: Mookie Betts.
Lara: Andrew Heaney.
Norris: Mookie Betts.
Lananna: Nathan Eovaldi.
Belinsky: Mookie Betts.



Mookie Betts, Red Sox



Cole Hamels, Phillies

Biggest name to be traded in 2015?

Manuel: Chase Utley.
Cooper: David Price.
Eddy: Cole Hamels.
Leventhal: Craig Kimbrel.
Badler: Cole Hamels.
Lara: David Price.
Norris: Cole Hamels.
Lananna: Cole Hamels.
Belinsky: Cole Hamels.

What Will Be The Biggest Team Surprise in 2015?

John Manuel: I know **the Rays** will miss some of their big names, but they've made incremental upgrades to improve the lineup. The outfield of Kevin Kermier, Desmond Jennings and Steven Souza should be dynamic, and I believe in Kevin Cash as a first-year manager. Moreover, the AL East is down. I see the Rays contending most of the year if not winning the division.

J.J. Cooper: **The Mariners** haven't had a splashy offseason, but then, this team was in the playoff race until the final day last year despite getting zero production from first base and designated hitter. Nelson Cruz should fix one of those problems, and the team has also done a good job of adding low-priced depth. Rickie Weeks isn't a great fit as an everyday second baseman, but as a platoon utilityman, he is a nice addition. Seattle also has depth at shortstop (Brad Miller and Chris Taylor) and a solid rotation.

Matt Eddy: **The Indians** don't have great lineup balance (at this point), but the pitching staff misses a ton of bats (AL-best 8.9 SO/9 last year) and the LH-heavy lineup plays well at Progressive Field. Look for a bounceback from Jason Kipnis and contributions from No. 1 prospect Francisco Lindor.

Josh Leventhal: Not much went right for **the Indians** in 2014 and they were still in the AL Central hunt in August. With the Tigers looking beatable—and the Indians bringing back Jason Kipnis healthy, Danny Salazar focused and Francisco Lindor ready for an opportunity—the Tribe should make a run at Detroit.

Ben Badler: **The Rangers'** injuries last year were historically painful. There will be some carryover effect into 2015, but the underlying talent on most of the roster is there, with breakout potential from youngsters like Rougned Odor and more.

Vince Lara: They still have a hole at shortstop and an outfield lacking punch, but **the Mets'** deep rotation and staff and the near-ready reinforcements give them unparalleled pitching depth to use and trade. They'll contend for a wild card.

Josh Norris: All of **the Cubs'** prospects will give them well-proportioned reinforcements and have them in the division hunt late into the year.

Mike Lananna: **The Blue Jays** have youth and upside on the mound in Marcus Stroman and Daniel Norris and a veteran catcher in Russell Martin to guide them. The addition of Josh Donaldson makes an already potent lineup much deeper. The AL East has never been more wide open. This is the time to strike.

Hudson Belinsky: **The Mets'** pitching will be even stronger in 2015, with Matt Harvey expected to be ready to go for Opening Day, and top prospect Noah Syndergaard on the cusp of a major league callup. The Mets also added a high-risk, high-reward outfielder in Michael Cuddyer, and a few steps forward from the offense could vault New York into wild-card contention.

World Series Prediction

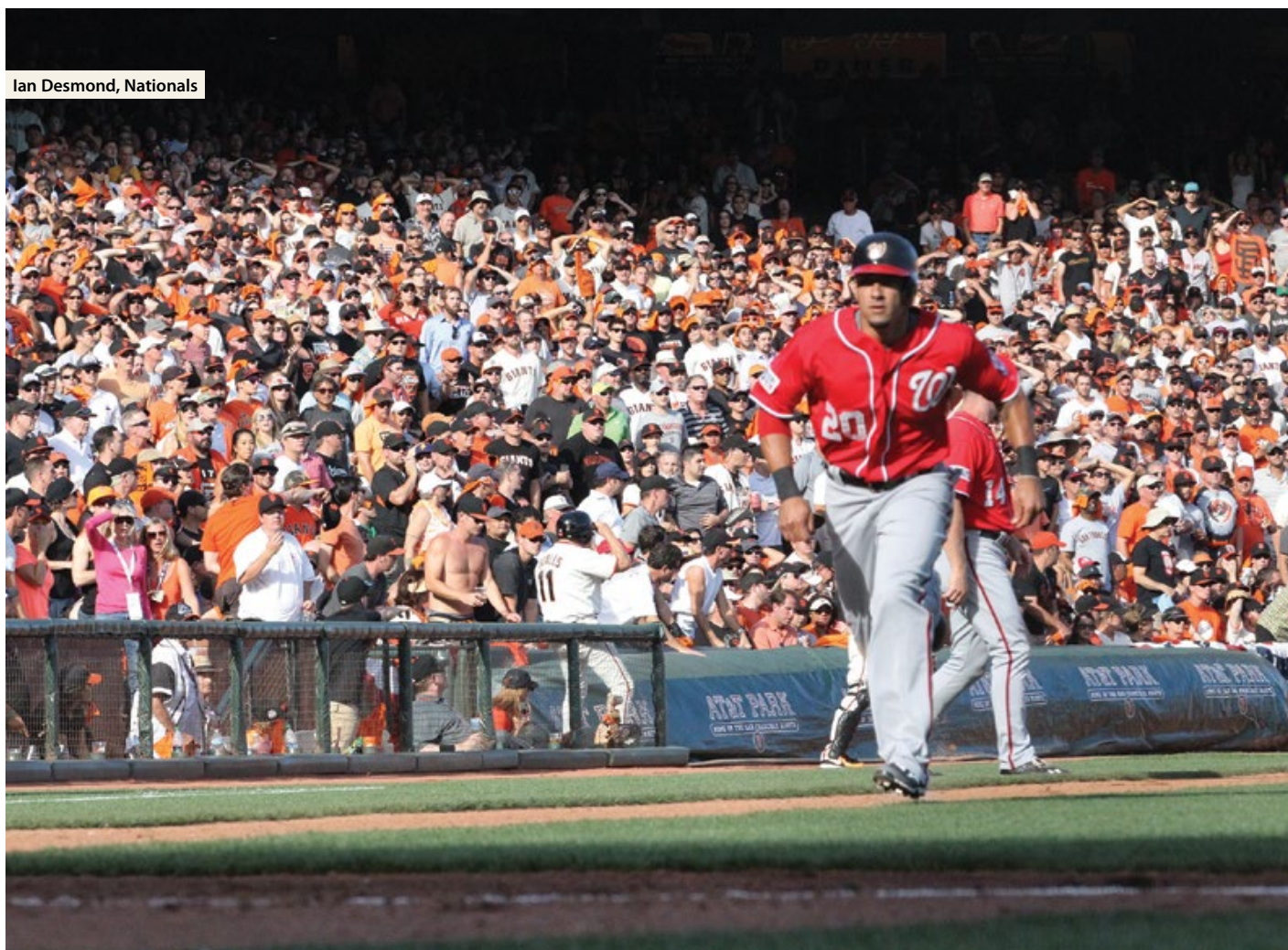
Manuel: Nationals over Angels (5 games).
Cooper: Red Sox over Nationals (6).
Eddy: Dodgers over Red Sox (5).
Leventhal: Nationals over Red Sox (6).
Badler: Nationals over Mariners (6).
Lara: Nationals over White Sox (6).
Norris: Nationals over White Sox (7).
Lananna: Dodgers over Mariners (6).
Belinsky: Blue Jays over Nationals (6).

Top three picks in 2016 draft will belong to ...

Manuel: 1. Phillies, 2. Diamondbacks, 3. Rockies.
Cooper: 1. Phillies, 2. Diamondbacks, 3. Twins.
Eddy: 1. D-backs, 2. Phillies, 3. Astros.
Leventhal: 1. Phillies, 2. Twins, 3. Braves.
Badler: 1. D-Backs, 2. Phillies, 3. Twins
Lara: 1. Phillies, 2. Twins, 3. Astros
Norris: 1. Phillies, 2. Astros, 3. Diamondbacks
Lananna: 1. Phillies, 2. Diamondbacks, 3. Twins.
Belinsky: 1. Dbacks, 2. Phillies, 3. Rockies.

Better big league season in 2015: Kris Bryant, Joey Gallo, Joc Pederson, Francisco Lindor?

Manuel: Pederson. **Lara:** Bryant.
Cooper: Bryant. **Norris:** Bryant.
Eddy: Bryant. **Lananna:** Pederson.
Leventhal: Pederson. **Belinsky:** Lindor.
Badler: Pederson.



Ian Desmond, Nationals

Parity makes AL races tricky to try to predict

AMERICAN LEAGUE EAST

1. BOSTON RED SOX

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Free-agent signees Hanley Ramirez and Pablo Sandoval provide new punch. The Red Sox hit their way to first place, then make a trade-deadline splash for an ace en route to their second worst-to-first turnaround in four years.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Father Time is undefeated—when does he catch up to the 39-year-old David Ortiz? Its rotation may not have an ace to help it break through for a playoff spot.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: LHP Wade Miley, RHP Rick Porcello, OF Hanley Ramirez, 3B Pablo Sandoval.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: RHP Rubby de la Rosa, RHP Burke Badenhop, 3B Will Middlebrooks, OF Jonny Gomes.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: OF/2B Mookie Betts.

2. BALTIMORE ORIOLES

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: The underrated rotation keeps performing like one of baseball's best. The healthy returns of Matt Wieters and Manny Machado would help make up for the loss of Nelson Cruz and his 40 home runs, as does a return to 2013 form by Chris Davis.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: A poor start—particularly if injuries hit the rotation—leads GM Dan Duquette to reboot one of the game's thinnest farm systems by trading impending free agents such as Wieters and Bud Norris for prospects.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: OF Travis Snider, C/DH J.P. Arencibia.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OFs Nelson Cruz and Nick Markakis, LHP Andrew Miller.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: LHP Wei-Yin Chen.

3. NEW YORK YANKEES

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Masahiro Tanaka stays healthy, C.C. Sabathia pitches better when heavy and Michael Pineda and Nathan Eovaldi join them in a rotation that provides power and proficiency. When they're done, the back of the bullpen of Dellin Betances and Andrew Miller should lock down any leads from the bullpen.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The return of Alex Rodriguez, with the circus that comes with him, could unravel the clubhouse. Tanaka and Sabathia, likely have to stay healthy for New York to return to the postseason.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: SS Didi Gregorius, LHPs Andrew Miller, Justin Wilson, RHP Nathan Eovaldi.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: SS Derek Jeter, 3B/OF Martin Prado, RHP Brandon McCarthy, OF Ichiro Suzuki.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Miller.

4. TORONTO BLUE JAYS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Russell Martin brings leadership and toughness, Josh Donaldson does the same and Jose Reyes stays healthy, giving the



Rookie Carlos Rodon could give the White Sox pitching staff a second-half boost

Blue Jays the division's best offense. That buys time for youngsters Marcus Stroman, Daniel Norris and Aaron Sanchez to lift the pitching staff and deliver the Jays' first division title since 1993.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: A thin bullpen collapses from its lack of power arms, and a right-leaning lineup doesn't get enough balance after Michael Saunders' knee injury.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: 3B Josh Donaldson, C Russell Martin, OF Michael Saunders, 2B Devon Travis.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 1B/DH Adam Lind, OF Melky Cabrera, 3B Brett Lawrie, OF Colby Rasmus, RHP Casey Janssen.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Marcus Stroman.

5. TAMPA BAY RAYS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Evan Longoria bounces back, Steven Souza replaces Wil Myers and then some, and Alex Cobb fronts the best rotation in the division. The return of Matt Moore and a deep bullpen give first-year manager Kevin Cash options to put the Rays in the wild-card hunt.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Longoria's lack of protection in the lineup leaves him carrying too much of the load, and the pitching staff buckles under the weight of an offense that ranked last in the AL in runs in 2014.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: OF Steven Souza, SS/2B Asdrubal Cabrera, RHP Kevin Jepsen, C/DH John Jaso.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OF Matt Joyce, 2B/SS Ben Zobrist, RHP Jeremy Hellickson, LHP Cesar Ramos.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Alex Cobb.

AMERICAN LEAGUE CENTRAL

1. CHICAGO WHITE SOX

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Jeff Samardzija's return to Chicago forms a potent trio with lefties Chris Sale and Jose Quintana, with rookie Carlos Rodon providing a late boost. Vets Adam LaRoche and Melky Cabrera boost the offense, and the top-heavy lineup and rotation deliver a division title.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Chicago's holes at catcher and second base fester, and the back of the rotation never quite comes around.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: DH/1B Adam LaRoche, OF Melky Cabrera, RHPs David Robertson, Samardzija.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 2B/SS Marcus Semien, 1B Paul Konerko, C Josh Phegley.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Quintana.

2. DETROIT TIGERS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Detroit's veteran horses reverse their declines, particularly Justin Verlander. Joe Nathan and Joakim Soria give the Tigers a serviceable bullpen and playoff run.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Nathan, Soria and the pen falters early. An older, unbalanced lineup will struggle if SS Jose Iglesias and CF Anthony Gose live up to their all-glove, no-bat reputations.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: RHPs Shane Greene and Alfredo Simon, OF Yoenis Cespedes, LHP Tom Gorzelanny.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: RHPs Max Scherzer and Rick Porcello, OF Torii Hunter, RHP Joba Chamberlain.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Anibal Sanchez.

3. KANSAS CITY ROYALS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Yordano Ventura grows into an ace while Edinson Volquez becomes a staff bulwark, and Eric Hosmer and Mike

Moustakas hit like they did in the playoffs..

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Free-agent signings such as DH Kendrys Morales and OF Alex Rios wash out, and the Royals don't get enough leads for the game's best bullpen to protect.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Morales, Rios, Volquez.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: DH Billy Butler, RHP James Shields, OF Nori Aoki.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Hosmer.

4. CLEVELAND INDIANS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Terry Francona pushes the right buttons, finding consistent answers in the bullpen. The lineup gets a second-half spark from SS Francisco Lindor as the Tribe wins the division.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: A first-division team suffers with a second-division bullpen, while Trevor Bauer distracts his way out of the rotation. Keep an eye on the health of OF Brandon Moss.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Moss, RHP Gavin Floyd.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: None.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: C Yan Gomes.

5. MINNESOTA TWINS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Joe Mauer rediscovers his mojo, as does Ricky Nolasco, who forms a solid rotation with Phil Hughes and Ervin Santana that puts the Twins in contention.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Mauer's slide continues. Depth issues hamstringing a below-average bullpen and sabotage an improved rotation.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Santana, DH/OF Torii Hunter.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: RHPs Jared Burton, Kevin Correa.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: OF Oswaldo Arcia.

AMERICAN LEAGUE WEST

1. SEATTLE MARINERS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Nelson Cruz provides the perfect complement to lefty bats Robinson Cano and Kyle Seager, and the Mariners score enough to get Felix Hernandez his first playoff start.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The starters behind Hernandez all have had health scares, and if he gets hurt, all hell breaks loose.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Cruz, OF Seth Smith, LHP J.A. Happ.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OF Michael Saunders, RHP Brandon Maurer.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Taijuan Walker.

2. LOS ANGELES ANGELS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Oklahoma college products Garrett Richards (Sooners) and Andrew Heaney (Cowboys) inject life into an aging rotation as the Angels repeat as division champions.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Age and decline pull down Pujols and aces Jered Weaver and C.J. Wilson, exposing the team's lack of depth.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: 2B Josh Rutledge, OF Matt Joyce, Heaney.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 2B Howie Kendrick, RHP Kevin Jepsen, C Hank Conger.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Richards.

3. OAKLAND ATHLETICS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: New pieces like Marcus Semien, Ben Zobrist and Brett Lawrie front a productive offense. Sonny Gray leads a young rotation until Jarrod Parker and A.J. Griffin return.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Losing Jon Lester and Jeff Samardzija proves too much to overcome.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Zobrist, DH Billy Butler, Semien, Lawrie.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: Lester, Samardzija, 3B Josh Donaldson, Brandon Moss.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Gray.

4. TEXAS RANGERS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Prince Fielder and Shin-Soo Choo bounce back, while Yovani Gallardo boosts the rotation for a playoff run.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: This is who Fielder and Choo are now. The rotation can't carry the club without injured lefties Matt Harrison and Martin Perez.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Gallardo, LHP Ross Detwiler, OFs Ryan Ludwick and Nate Schierholtz.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: SS Luis Sardinas, LHP Neal Cotts, RHP Alexi Ogando.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: 2B Rougned Odor.

5. HOUSTON ASTROS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Pitching coach Brent Strom works his magic, George Springer breaks through into stardom, and a revamped bullpen helps manager A.J. Hinch make the Astros competitive for the first time in seven seasons.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Strikeouts short-circuit the offense while the lack of power arms in the rotation leads to a lack of them on the mound.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: OF/C Evan Gattis, C Hank Conger, SS Jed Lowrie, RHPs Luke Gregerson and Pat Neshek.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OF Dexter Fowler, RHP Mike Foltyniewicz.

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Springer.

POSTSEASON CRYSTAL BALL

WILD-CARDS:
Orioles,
Angels.

PENNANT:
Red Sox.

WORLD SERIES:
Nationals
over Red Sox.

CY YOUNG AWARD:
Felix Hernandez,
Mariners.

MVP:
Mike Trout,
Angels.

Can any team stop the Nationals?

NATIONAL LEAGUE EAST

1. WASHINGTON NATIONALS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Free agent gem Max Scherzer rounds out the best rotation since the mid-1990s Braves. Ryan Zimmerman's shift to first goes flawlessly, and Matt Williams manages October like it's October as Washington wins its first championship since the Senators in 1924.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The Nats have few obvious holes, but Williams has to handle expectations better than then-manager Davey Johnson and the Nats did in 2013. The Nats' bullpen stands as the team's biggest weakness.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Scherzer, SS/2B Yunel Escobar, RHP Casey Janssen

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 1B Adam LaRoche, RHP Tyler Clippard, LHP Ross Detwiler

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: 3B Anthony Rendon

2. NEW YORK METS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Matt Harvey shows no rust from his Tommy John surgery and fronts a boffo rotation. Old buddy Michael Cuddyer coaxes David Wright to use the whole field, and vintage Wright leads the Mets to a wild-card berth.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Wilmer Flores at shortstop hardly seems like a playoff prescription. The fragile offense won't do enough if Wright's production flatlines, or Lucas Duda's 30-homer season proves a mirage, or injuries and strikeouts mute the production of corner bats Cuddyer and Curtis Granderson.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Cuddyer

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: RHP Daisuke Matsuzaka



Multi-tool Andrew McCutchen gives the Pirates one of baseball's best weapons

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Zack Wheeler

3. MIAMI MARLINS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Dee Gordon and Michael Morse spark the lineup with Giancarlo Stanton. Jose Fernandez returns to give the rotation a second-half boost, spurring a wild-card spot.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The Marlins are bucking baseball's trends with only one lefty reliever and none in the rotation. The offense could sag if Gordon has another second-half fade.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS:

Gordon, Morse, RHP Mat Latos, RHP Dan Haren, 3B/OF Martin Prado

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 1B Garrett Jones, 3B Casey McGehee, RHP Nathan Eovaldi

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: OF Christian Yelich

4. ATLANTA BRAVES

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: An offseason of change still left Atlanta with one of the NL's better rotations, especially if Shelby Miller takes the next step. Any productivity from Melvin (the artist formerly known as B.J.) Upton would help.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: If the offense backs up as much as it seems it will, the focus will turn completely to the future.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Miller, OF Nick Markakis

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OFs Jason Heyward and Justin Upton, C/OF Evan Gattis, RHP Ervin Santana

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: SS Andrelton Simmons

5. PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: When Pat Gillick says it's time to rebuild, then the best-case scenario has to be rebuilding. Ruben Amaro Jr. could get prime pieces for stars like LHPs Cole Hamels and Cliff Lee.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The return on those trades falls short. Continued falling attendance and apathy would follow.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: RHPs Chad Billingsley and Aaron Harang

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OF Marlon Byrd, SS Jimmy Rollins, RHP A.J. Burnett, RHP Kyle Kendrick

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Kenny Giles

POSTSEASON CRYSTAL BALL

WILD CARDS:
Giants, Pirates

NL PENNANT:
Nationals

WORLD SERIES:
Nationals over Red Sox

CY YOUNG:
Clayton Kershaw

MVP:
Andrew McCutchen

NATIONAL LEAGUE CENTRAL

1. ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Jason Heyward blossoms in St. Louis, Matt Carpenter's power returns, and righty Carlos Martinez, motivated by the tragic death of close friend Oscar Taveras, breaks out into a full-fledged power starter.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Four simple words: Yadier Molina gets hurt. Mike Matheny's management of his 32-year-old catcher's playing time may be his biggest challenge.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Heyward, 1B Mark Reynolds, RHP Jordan Walden

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: RHP Shelby Miller, OF Oscar Taveras (deceased), RHP Pat Neshek

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: 2B Kolten Wong

2. PITTSBURGH PIRATES

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Led by the NL's best player, Andrew McCutchen, the Pirates continue their playoff stretch as Gerrit Cole, Starling Marte and Gregory Polanco mature into stars. If veteran A.J. Burnett becomes a needed rotation workhorse, the Pirates can win the division.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Replacing Russell Martin in the lineup, behind the plate and in the clubhouse proves impossible in one season, and the bullpen slides just enough for a playoff miss.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS:

Burnett, C Francisco Cervelli, UTIL Sean Rodriguez, SS/2B Jung Ho Kang

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: Martin, RHP Edinson Volquez, 1B Ike Davis, OF Travis Snider

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Marte

3. CHICAGO CUBS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Ace Jon Lester, Jake Arrieta and Jason Hammel pitch the Cubs into contention. Javier Baez, Jorge Soler and Kris Bryant thrive and the Cubs arrive ahead of schedule.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The rotation's back end fails to pull its weight, exposing a modest bullpen, and new manager Joe Maddon struggles to bring out Starlin Castro's best.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Lester, C Miguel Montero, OF Dexter Fowler

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 3B Luis Valbuena, LHP Wesley Wright, RHP Carlos Villanueva

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Bryant

4. CINCINNATI REDS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: A top-heavy team of stars keeps Joey Votto and Joey Cueto healthy. Throw in a breakout by Cuban righty Raisel Iglesias, and the Reds have the star talent to compete.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Last season showed

how thin the Reds' margin is, and the rotation appears to have less depth. After Votto, the lineup lacks patience, which could mean they're out of contention when the All-Star Game rolls into town.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: OF Marlon Byrd, RHP Anthony DeSclafani, RHP Burke Badenhop, 2B/SS Eugenio Suarez

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: RHP Mat Latos, OF Chris Heisey, RHP Alfredo Simon

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Homer Bailey

5. MILWAUKEE BREWERS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Ryan Braun provides his pre-Biogenesis power to complement a resurgent Jean Segura and stalwarts Carlos Gomez and Jonathan Lucroy in a potentially potent lineup that complements a solid rotation.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: If Braun hits like he did in 2014, the Brewers are in trouble, and a poor start could lead to a selloff. Impending free agents Aramis Ramirez and Kyle Lohse would be nice pieces for a contender.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: 1B Adam Lind, LHP Neal Cotts

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 2B Rickie Weeks, 1B Mark Reynolds, RHP Marco Estrada

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: RHP Willy Peralta

NATIONAL LEAGUE WEST

1. LOS ANGELES DODGERS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Only a World Series trip will do. For that to happen, Joc Pederson gives them a power lefty bat, and Yasiel Puig becomes a consistently dynamic force.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The bullpen has to make do as closer Kenley Jansen recovers from foot surgery, a problem the Dodgers hope doesn't linger.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: RHP Brandon McCarthy, C Yasmani Grandal, SS Jimmy Rollins, 2B Howie Kendrick

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OF Matt Kemp, SS Hanley Ramirez, 2B Dee Gordon, RHPs Josh Beckett and Dan Haren

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Pederson

2. SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: Matt Cain and Tim Lincecum pitch like it's 2010, while the return of Angel Pagan spurs another playoff run.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: An offseason of missed free-agent targets takes its toll. Bumgarner's workload catches up with him; age does the same with Tim Hudson and Jake Peavy.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: 3B Casey McGehee, OF Nori Aoki

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: 3B Pablo Sandoval, 1B/OF Michael Morse

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: SS Brandon Crawford

3. SAN DIEGO PADRES

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: All that righthanded power plays, and Matt Kemp, Will Myers and Justin Upton slug the Padres into the thick of the division. James Shields brings leadership to the staff and Andrew Cashner develops into an ace.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The very right-handed lineup (and pitching staff) and defensively challenged outfield gets swallowed up by the NL West's large ballparks.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: Kemp, Myers, Upton, Shields, C Derek Norris

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OF Seth Smith, C Rene Rivera, SS Everth Cabrera

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: Cashner

4. COLORADO ROCKIES

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: It all starts with the health of stars like Troy Tulowitzki and Jorge de la Rosa. But if Colorado can keep it close early, reinforcements from the farm system could bring second-half hope.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: Tying themselves to the fragile Tulowitzki and Gonzalez seems unlikely. GM Jeff Bridich may be best served with a total rebuild based on a strong farm system.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: RHP Kyle Kendrick, RHP David Hale, UT Daniel Descalso

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: OF Michael Cuddyer, 2B/SS Josh Rutledge,

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: OF Corey Dickerson

5. ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS

BEST-CASE SCENARIO: New manager Chip Hale and a healthy Paul Goldschmidt invigorate the roster. Trevor Cahill and Daniel Hudson return to lead a surprise run at a wild-card spot.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO: The roster has no regular catcher, which isn't usually a path to contention. If it all goes wrong, Arizona could pick No. 1 overall for the second straight year in 2016.

BIGGEST OFFSEASON ACQUISITIONS: 3B/OF Yasmany Tomas, RHP Jeremy Hellickson

BIGGEST OFFSEASON LOSSES: C Miguel Montero, SS Didi Gregorius, LHP Wade Miley

NEXT FIRST-TIME ALL-STAR: OF A.J. Pollock

Olivera could become next Cuban star

BY BEN BADLER

SANTO DOMINGO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Hector Olivera knows the questions are coming.

He knows, because for a five-year stretch, Olivera was a star in Cuba. At home, he dominated Serie Nacional, Cuba's top league. He was a standout on the Cuban national team during international tournaments, including the 2008 Olympics and 2009 World Baseball Classic. At the 2010 Intercontinental Cup in Puerto Rico, where he was teammates with current big leaguers Jose Abreu and Yoenis Cespedes, as well as current Cuban stars Yulieski Gourriel and Alfredo Despaigne, it was Olivera who earned the tournament MVP trophy.

Wherever he played, Olivera grabbed the attention of major league scouts. He was a righthanded-hitting second baseman who had size, speed, good power for a middle infielder and advanced strike-zone discipline, and he routinely barreled balls up to all fields with plus bat speed. The scouting and the analytics translating his Serie Nacional performance in Cuba all pointed to an above-average big leaguer.

"I liked Hector Olivera a lot," one long-time scout says now. "When I saw him, he was one of the better players. He was big, athletic and he could hit. He was an average power guy who could steal 20 to 25 bases and play every day in the middle of the field. I had a really big grade on him."

But Olivera knows that teams don't want to talk to him about what it was like to be a star in Cuba. They want to know why, in his mid-20s, Olivera missed the end of the 2011-12 season, sat out the entire 2012-13 season and didn't play in any international tournaments during that stretch. And why, when he finally returned to Serie Nacional last season for the 2013-14 campaign, did he play just 29 games of the 90-game season at second base and spend most of his time at DH?

"Everybody asks," Olivera said in Spanish. "It's the same things they ask."

The word for years had been that Olivera, 29, was sidelined due to a blood disorder in his left biceps. Through his recent play on the field during the tryout process, both at his open showcase games and private workouts, Olivera has answered questions about his present ability and conditioning level after scouts had gone years without seeing him in person. Yet the uncertainty about his medical past and how it could shape his baseball future is what has even highly interested teams feeling uneasy, especially with a big price tag.

"We like him," says another veteran scout. "How could we not like him? I certainly respect his numbers and his ability, but he's (almost) 30 years old, with a history of health problems and no national team exposure in recent years. We like him, we just have a lot of questions. I think the biggest question is, what's wrong with him, and how serious is it? Nobody really knows. People can say they know, but they don't. They can speculate, but nobody knows for sure."

Blood Problems

Olivera's run as an elite performer in Serie Nacional started with a breakthrough 2007-08 campaign for Santiago De Cuba. As a 22-year-old, he batted .353/.467/.542 with 10 home runs, 55 walks, 28 strikeouts and 21 stolen bases in 22 attempts that season.

By the 2011-12 season, Olivera already



Teams have had to weigh Olivera's obvious ability against questions about his medical history, which included nearly two full seasons missed, and limited information available coming out of Cuba

had established himself as a star on the international stage and a premium prospect in the eyes of major league scouts. He was 26 years old, having the best season of his career. There were two months left in the 2011-12 season, but Olivera had already set a personal single-season high with 17 home runs. His OBP and slugging were the best marks of his career, with a .341/.462/.626 slash line in 60 games.

In a game at Isla de la Juventud on March 3, 2012, Olivera hit third in the lineup, went 2-for-4 and played second base. It ended up being the last game Olivera played not only that season, but the last game he would play for a year and eight months.

"My arm was heavy and it got swollen," Olivera says. "When they did an ultrasound, they noticed I had a blood clot in my left biceps. The arm felt different. It just felt heavy and it was swollen."

"The doctors told me I would have to take three months off at least, and then I could come back. When it happened, it was almost toward the end of the season, so I took the end of the year off."

The doctors gave Olivera blood thinners. They told him he couldn't play while he was taking the medication, so Olivera missed the last two months of the 2011-12 season. Olivera thought he would be able to return for the 2012-13 season. Instead, the doctors told him they wanted him to stay on the

blood thinners for a full year, causing him to miss the entire 2012-13 campaign. No games, no practice, nothing. Olivera just spent time resting at his house and hanging out with his family.

"It was very hard," Olivera said. "I felt like I was becoming a complete player. I only needed two home runs to get to 100 (career home runs) and 36 hits to get to 1,000 that year, which I thought I was going to do."

Olivera was one month shy of his 27th birthday when he played that final game of the 2011-12 season. He was in the prime of his career. Had he been healthy and left Cuba then, international scouts would have been pounding the table for their teams to sign him. Instead, Olivera's blood clot meant scouts went years without being able to see him in person because he couldn't play in any international tournaments, including the 2013 WBC, where Jose Miguel Fernandez emerged as the team's new second baseman.

"It was tough because I felt like I was at my peak and I was already the established second baseman," Olivera says. "It was tough for me not to participate."

Back To Baseball

Before the 2013-14 season began in November 2013, the doctors told Olivera he no longer needed to take the blood thinners and that he was cleared to play baseball again. Olivera said he hasn't taken the medi-

cation since then. He returned to the field and hit well, batting .316/.412/.474 with seven home runs, 38 walks and 25 strikeouts in 273 plate appearances.

But that season raised more questions for teams. His offensive performance remained robust, but Olivera played just 29 games at second base. He played a few games at first base, but most of his time he spent at DH. Olivera said that was his decision.

When the 2013-14 season started, a sore hamstring hampered Olivera. He spent the first three games of the season at DH, but he missed nearly three weeks after that to allow his hamstring to recover. After a few games at first base, Olivera returned to play second base full-time. For the rest of the first half of the season, Olivera played the position every day, including both ends of doubleheaders.

In Cuba, the season is split into two halves. The teams that finish in the top eight in the standings of the 16-team league advance to the second half of the season, while the bottom eight get eliminated. Those top eight teams then hold a draft—five rounds in 2013-14—to select reinforcement players from the teams that were eliminated in the first half.

Santiago De Cuba barely squeaked into the second phase, finishing the first half tied for seventh place at 24-21. When the second half started, the team took a nosedive, going 1-8 to drop to 25-29 before the Serie Nacional season paused for nearly three weeks for the Caribbean Series.

During Santiago De Cuba's slide, Olivera played two games at second base and spent the rest at DH. The two other second basemen the team used were Anibal Sierra, a light-hitting 19-year-old with a good glove, and Michael Gonzalez, a 29-year-old reinforcement from Mayabeque who's more advanced in the field than at the plate. Olivera didn't play another game at second base the rest of the season.

"The reason was we got disqualified early (from playoff contention)," he says. "The manager and I talked about giving the younger kids a chance to play. So I asked him to DH me and play the younger guys."

When the Caribbean Series ended and the Serie Nacional season resumed, Gonzalez spent the next week playing second base, then gave way to 22-year-old Adriel Labrada, who became the team's regular second baseman the rest of the season, with Olivera hitting in the middle of the order at DH.

Santiago De Cuba went 12-30 in the second half of the season, finishing 36-51 overall, last place among all second-half teams. By the end of the season in March, with nothing left to play for, Olivera stayed at home with the team's permission and didn't play the last week of the season.

Teams can choose whether to take Olivera at his word as to why he spent so much time at DH during his final season in Cuba, but the timeline of his story checks out. Had he known his playing time in the field would have been so heavily scrutinized by scouts due to his medical history, maybe he would have done things differently. But by then, Olivera had already become fed up with the system and the government in Cuba.

"When I got hurt at the very beginning, yeah, they were taking care of me," Olivera says. "But as time went on, I felt like they didn't care about me, that they had forgotten about me, that I had to make my own arrangements to get to the doctor, that I had to go to find my own transportation to go to Havana to get treatment. So I saw the

PHOTOS BY BILL MITCHELL

writing on the wall and said if I get hurt or something like that, these people are not going to take care of me. I'm only as good as the last thing that I've done for them.

"I was very disillusioned with that. One of the biggest reasons why I wanted to DH was because I was really pissed off that I felt like I wasn't being treated correctly."

Even after Olivera returned for the 2013-14 season, his future on the Cuban national team was in doubt. At the WBC, Fernandez emerged as the national team second baseman and one of the most promising players on the island. Since October, Fernandez, 26, has been suspended in Cuba for what's believed to be an attempt to defect. At that time, though, Fernandez had second base locked down on the national team.

When Cuba hosted USA Baseball's Collegiate National Team for a five-game series in July 2014, Cuba built its team around players in their 20s with an eye toward the 2017 WBC. Fernandez, of course, was the second baseman. Behind him was David Castillo, a decent player in Cuba, but nowhere near Olivera's caliber. Olivera wasn't even on the team.

"By that time, I was already disillusioned," Olivera says. "In Cuba, whoever's going hot at the time, that's who they are going with. I felt very disillusioned with that."

So in September, Olivera fled Cuba to pursue a contract with a major league team. Now training in the Dominican Republic, Olivera said he feels reinvigorated with the opportunities ahead of him that he never had at home.

"In Cuba, no matter what you do, you're going to have the same," Olivera says. "Here, you feel motivated to do well and get better every day because you get compensated. The better you do, the more you get compensated."

Young Star

Olivera's father is Hector Olivera Gonzalez, who batted .459 for Las Villas in 1980 to become the first Cuban hitter to hit .400. Olivera's father had a 13-year career in Serie Nacional and was an accomplished hitter on the Cuban national team in the '70s and '80s.

Baseball runs in Olivera's family, but his father isn't the one who taught him the game. Olivera grew up with his mom, and while Olivera said his dad always supported him, he developed his love for baseball on his own during an excursion to a Cuban baseball academy run by the government.

"When I was in fourth grade, I left my house one day and disappeared to go to this place where they train all the better kids," Olivera said. "I didn't come home until late at night. My mom was worried about where I was. I told her I wanted to play baseball, and that I had enlisted myself in the academy to play baseball."

Cuban baseball officials quickly realized Olivera was one of the top talents in the country for his age group. The first time Olivera ever left Cuba was in 1997, when he played in an international tournament for players age 11-12 in the Dominican Republic.

"When we came here, we played at Estadio Quisqueya," said Olivera, referring to the Dominican League winter ball stadium in Santo Domingo. "I saw how far the fence was and how high. I went, 'Oh my God!'"

Olivera played in another international tournament that year in Colombia, where he said he played left field and hit .400. Five years later, Olivera had become one of the top hitters in the Cuban junior leagues, batting .430 and slugging .663 in the country's national 18U league in 2002 as a 17-year-old. He earned a spot on the junior national



'Big, athletic and he could hit. I had a big grade on him,' said a scout who saw Olivera play in Cuba

team, traveling to Canada in 2002 for the 18U World Championship and to Curacao the next year for the 18U Pan American Championship.

Some Cubans never get to leave the island, but Olivera had already traveled to four different countries as a teenager before he started a remarkable but abbreviated career on the Cuban national team, with the most high-profile events being the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the 2009 WBC, which included a trip to San Diego to play in Petco Park.

"That experience in San Diego was a magical experience," Olivera says. "It was a very nice place to experience the culture. It's always a beautiful thing when you get to participate in those kind of events outside of your country, especially in the United States."

The Cubans faced South Africa and Australia, then played Mexico and Japan twice, with two losses to Japan that eliminated them from the second round of pool play.

"The pitching was pretty much the same," Olivera says. "There were guys who threw 94-95, but their concept of pitching, the way they maneuver those pitches—like breaking balls for strikes, breaking balls away—it's just a little different. It wasn't that big of a difference because back then, Cuba had a lot of hard-throwing pitchers. So it wasn't like I was overwhelmed with velocity or anything. It's just that the command was a little sharper and the strike zone was a little smaller, but it wasn't a big difference."

Now, though, the gap is getting bigger, with defections draining the quality of play in Cuba, not just among the stars but a wave of players behind them that are leaving the island faster than major league scouts can keep track of them.

"No doubt, losing so many players has hurt the talent level," Olivera says. "There are younger guys who are now coming, so in a few years it should improve again, but it's

not quite the talent that it once was."

Olivera now can only watch from afar as the Cuban team wins the Caribbean Series in Puerto Rico in February. It's not the national team—technically it's the Pinar Del Rio club that won the Serie Nacional championship last season—but the team was heavily reinforced with the country's top players.

"I feel very happy for them and I feel very proud," Olivera says. "I always feel good when they win because when they win, they get compensated and they're able to help their families. After all, that's the most important thing there is."

Some of Olivera's family is still in Cuba. He lives in a house in Santo Domingo with his wife. His mom, who had lived with him and his wife in Cuba, has been able to visit them, but she's back in Cuba now. So is his five-year-old son from a previous marriage. Olivera's son lived with his mom in Cuba during the week and stayed with Olivera on weekends, but they lived close by, so Olivera used to see his son nearly every day.

"It's a sacrifice," Olivera says. "I felt it was something I needed to do because I would like to have them with me in the near future, and I would like to fulfill my dream of playing in the big leagues. They're a big support to me."

New Motivation

In his new home, Olivera's typical day is split into two sessions. In the morning, from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m., Olivera does baseball activities; fielding grounders, taking batting practice, facing live pitching or playing in a loosely organized game. After recharging, he goes back to the field from 5 p.m. until 9 p.m. to work on his strength and conditioning, lifting weights, running sprints and doing other track-and-field workouts. He's also had three open showcases and held private workouts for teams.

"Definitely this has been harder than any-

thing I've done because it's more demanding," Olivera says. "Physically, I feel like I've worked hard to go to the complexes, to have to run the 60 every day, to do a lot of things every day where you have to look your best and you have to look better every time. I feel like I needed to train as hard as I have, and I've been able to have really good results every time."

He's a big man, bigger than he was when scouts saw him on the Cuban national team. Olivera had a livelier, more athletic frame back then, but he had gotten heavier in his final season in Cuba. He's now 6-foot-2, 220 pounds, up from his national team days but carrying the weight better than he did during his final season in Cuba.

His three open showcase games have attracted hundreds of scouts and evaluators. In his first game, he had three hits. In his second game, he pulled two home runs to left field. He reached base in all five plate appearances of his final game, going 3-for-3 with two doubles, a walk and a hit by pitch. Olivera isn't facing big league pitching, but in these games and throughout his history of international competition and Serie Nacional performance, he's shown good strike-zone management and bat-to-ball skills.

"I always try to get a good pitch to hit," Olivera says. "I try to get a good fastball where I can put the head of the bat on the ball and drive the ball."

In his final open showcase game, two of Olivera's hits went to right field, including a double into the right-center field gap. "I like to let the ball travel deep," Olivera says. "I use the right part of the field because I feel like I can drive the ball that way."

Olivera primarily played second base in Cuba, but teams looked at him at second and third base, even a little bit in the corner outfield. Olivera hasn't played much third base in a while, though he came up through the Cuban junior leagues as a third baseman and played there briefly when he entered Serie Nacional.

"The only difference is, at third base you have to be more aware because things happen quicker and the ball gets to you quicker," Olivera says. "At second base, you have to be concentrating more on your routes to the ball and moving quickly because you have to cover more of the field. At third base, it's one step here, one step there and the ball gets on you. So you just try to be really focused because the ball gets in on you quickly."

Still, the questions for teams aren't so much about whether Olivera can handle second or third base, but whether he's healthy enough to play the field every day. It's one thing to play every day in Cuba, where 90 games comprise the schedule, with a consistent, repeating game schedule of three days on, one day off, with breaks during the season for international tournaments, no cross-country flights. It's another to be able to adapt to the 162-game daily grind of Major League Baseball.

Olivera is confident he can handle it, that his health issues are a thing of the past. Entering his 30s, Olivera's prime years may be behind him, but there's still an excitement in the international scouting world that, if he's able to play every day, he could make an immediate impact in the middle of a lineup like Cespedes did in Oakland. He could follow in the footsteps of his good friend Abreu and win the rookie of the year award, but that's not on Olivera's mind right now.

"I don't think about anything other than going all out and taking care of business," Olivera says. "I don't set any goals. I figure that if I do all those things, I go hard every day and I concentrate and I focus, at the end of the year, all those things will take care of themselves."

Power outage means change in your approach

BY CHRIS MITCHELL

In 1998, baseball fans were enthralled by Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa's chase to pass Roger Maris' record of 61 home runs in a season. They both smashed past that mark, slugging 66 and 70 home runs, respectively.

While the 1998 season was not the peak of what most people now refer to as the Steroid Era, there were 5,064 home runs in the major leagues that year and McGwire and Sosa announced with 136 cracks of the bat that home runs were coming like a stampede.

From 1998-2009, just two major league seasons featured fewer than 5,000 home runs, with the lowest total being 4,878 in 2008. For fantasy players, gathering home runs hitters was a must, but they were also cheap and plentiful and could come out of nowhere as their, uh, training regimens changed.

As baseball's new performance-enhancing drug rules started to take hold, however, they started to defuse the power explosion. Since 2010, the major leagues have not had a single 5,000-home run season. Last year major league players hit just 4,186 home runs, the lowest total since 1995 (4,081).

In 1998, 85 players hit 20 or more home runs. Thirty-three players hit 30 or more, while 13 hit 40 or more. In 2014, the pulse of the power hitter was barely detectable. Fifty-seven players hit 20 or more home runs, eleven hit 30 or more and only Nelson Cruz bashed 40. More players reached 50 home runs in 1998 (Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, Ken Griffey Jr. and Greg Vaughn) than reached 40 in 2013-14 combined (Nelson Cruz, Chris Davis and Miguel Cabrera).

Today's major league game barely resembles what we saw in 1998, and fantasy owners are being forced to adapt to the new normal. That means longtime fantasy players have to recalibrate the way they think about power in general and home runs in particular—both in how many they need and how they will go about obtaining them.

Owners can try to live or die on the waiver wire (not recommended); they can try to find innovative ways to make trades in a power-starved fantasy world (good luck with that); or they can plan ahead with draft and auction strategies designed to adapt to the current fantasy baseball landscape.

One strategy is to prioritize grabbing home runs high in the draft. By using this approach, you load up on them early and depend on three or four of the most reliable power hitters in the game to do the majority of the heavy lifting for your team. Avoiding injuries (Prince Fielder and Ryan Braun) and busted seasons (Chris Davis) is crucial for this approach to work.

No matter what your approach, Mike Trout is the unanimous first overall selection, and it would be difficult to blame anyone for taking Giancarlo Stanton second—again, no matter what draft strategy you use.

After that, if you want to emphasize power you would prioritize sluggers like Miguel Cabrera, Paul Goldschmidt, Edwin Encarnacion or Jose Abreu early instead of more well-rounded players like Andrew McCutchen, Adam Jones or Carlos Gomez.

Beyond that tier of players, you would break conventional team-building wisdom and reach slightly for players like Jose Bautista and Josh Donaldson instead of players like Jose Altuve or middle infielders like Troy Tulowitzki and Ian Desmond.

As you get into the third, fourth and fifth rounds you will start to see the better



Proven sluggers like Jose Bautista are at a premium, but if they get hurt or underperform you're sunk

middle infielders and catchers go off the board, along with fantasy aces as well as some second-tier starters like Jon Lester and Jordan Zimmermann.

While you'll feel an overwhelming urge to draft one of these positions before it's too late, if you're playing the power-first approach you'll have to stay strong. Using this strategy means that you prioritize home run production in the early rounds above all else, and you won't find power hitters at that point in the middle infield, on the mound or at catcher.

You have to be willing to have a James Shields or Gio Gonzalez as your top starter, and you also will have to pass on the players who are considered elite closers. Of course, in most cases you shouldn't pay a premium for closers anyway, but that's a subject for another time.

This approach also means that later in the draft you are going to have to draft some one-category speedsters like Denard Span, Ben Revere, Rajai Davis and Leonys Martin to fill gaps in your statistical lineup.

That's one of the potential pitfalls of this strategy; sluggers are often Three Outcome players. They homer, walk or strike out, which can lead to low batting averages. And most of them rarely run, which leads to low stolen base totals. (The most notable exception to this rule has been Goldschmidt, who had back-to-back double-digit stolen base seasons in 2012 and 2013 before dipping to nine last season, when he missed about two months with a broken hand.)

obvious, right? Not so much.

In the power-first strategy we discussed how you might select a Miguel Cabrera over McCutchen, or Encarnacion or Bautista over Adam Jones or Carlos Gomez. In this strategy, you would want to do the opposite in the early rounds.

In the middle rounds you would target players like Ben Zobrist, Melky Cabrera, Starling Marte and Alex Gordon instead of power hitters like Yoenis Cespedes and Wil Myers or speedy rabbits like Billy Hamilton or Dee Gordon.

In the later rounds it would mean drafting players like Asdrubal Cabrera or Daniel Murphy instead of Khris Davis, Chris Carter, Denard Span or Ben Revere types.

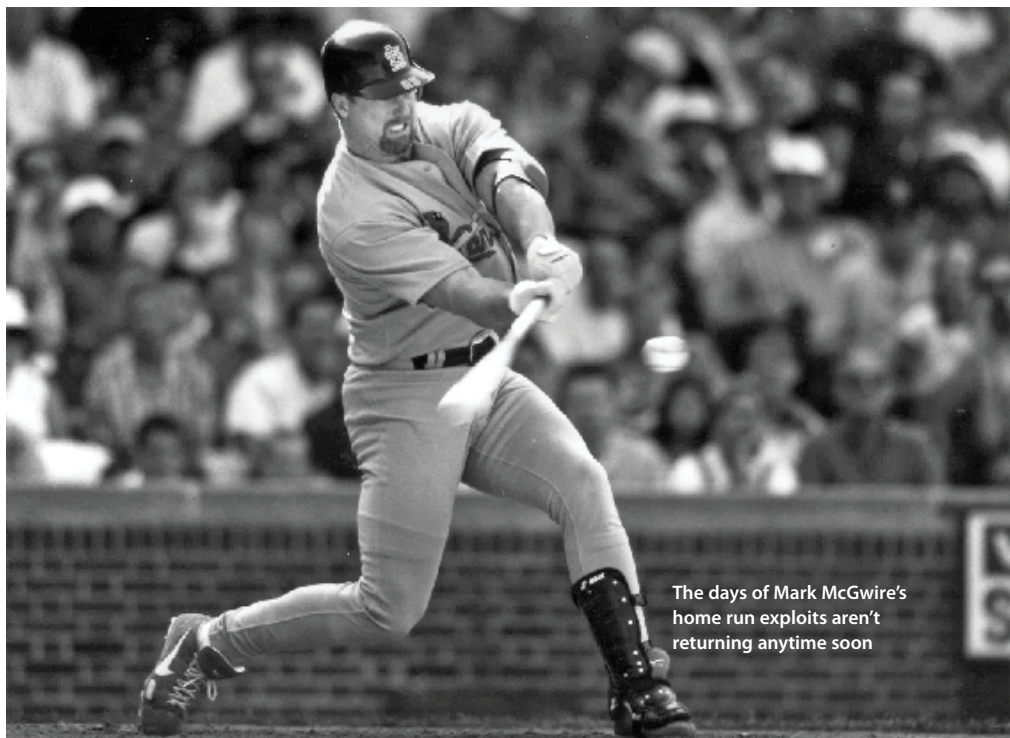
By drafting multi-tool talents from start to finish, you are relying on your entire starting lineup to provide the home runs that you might get from four to six elite sluggers with the other approach. This idea works well in head-to-head formats as well as traditional Rotisserie-style stat accumulation, because a couple of slumps or injuries won't sink a well-balanced roster as it might with a team that lives and dies with a few sluggers.

One of the downsides to this approach is that you may not be maximizing value. Mediocre players that provide modest production across multiple categories like Daniel Murphy or Asdrubal Cabrera don't have a lot of sizzle and have more of a tendency to be overlooked. So you can often find such players later in drafts (or for discounted prices in auctions), or acquire them in trades at affordable prices or even find comparable players on the waiver wire.

Try trading for a big-time bat like Jose Bautista or even a lesser player like Cespedes and it will cost you your first born. But, if you want to supplement a light-hitting roster by trading for Asdrubal Cabrera or Melky Cabrera, you should be able to do that without any significant changes to the core of your club.

Another downside is that while players like Curtis Granderson and Ryan Howard have plenty of flaws, they are rarely available on the waiver wire. One or two unheralded power hitters will pop early every season, but you need to guess right and be quick on the

If you aren't comfortable making such a big bet on power, then an alternative approach is to select well-balanced offensive players across the board for the entire draft. Seems



The days of Mark McGwire's home run exploits aren't returning anytime soon

waiver wire. Players like Josh Harrison or Erick Aybar, on the other hand, who produce 8-10 home runs and 10-12 steals, emerge pretty regularly.

If you aren't comfortable going all-in with either one of those approaches, then an alternative is to take extra time studying rookies, prospects and players coming back from injuries or big statistical dips—in other words, undervalued assets that could offer better-than-average value. This functions better as a supplement to your overall philosophy than an overall draft strategy.

And in today's world, where more and more people are aware of and excited by the potential of prospects, rookies are often actually overvalued in fantasy sports, and are the least likely group to meet or exceed expectations.

We can say all that, though, but what people remember is that Jose Abreu came to the majors and offered fantasy owners a host of reasons to be cautious. But those who grabbed him got a fantasy league MVP-caliber performance, from a player whose average draft position was between the 58th and 80th overall selection.

Similarly, Christian Yelich was drafted in the mid-120s in most leagues, and Kole Calhoun as late as 177th in some leagues last year.

And just as golfers forget about the many terrible shots they hit in a round and remember that one perfect swing, they forget about the more prevalent rookie busts that tend to highlight the early rounds of fantasy drafts. So while we cherry-picked the pleasant surprises, that's ignoring the players like Brad Miller of the Mariners, Xander Bogaerts of the Red Sox and Nick Castellano of the Tigers who put a significant crimp in the planning of many hopeful fantasy owners last year.

So with all that said, some young players with pop to target this year are Joc Pederson of the Dodgers, Kris Bryant, Jorge Soler and Javier Baez of the Cubs, Jonathan Singleton of the Astros and Maikel Franco of the Phillies. Just be aware of the downside.

Probably a more reliable application of this strategy is to target guys coming off injuries or disastrous seasons in 2014. Players like Prince Fielder, Ryan Braun or especially Chris Davis, who followed a 2013 season when he hit .286/.370/.634 with 53 home runs with a 2014 when he batted .196/.300/.404 with 26 home runs and a 25-game suspension for Adderall use at the end of the season.

That introduces uncertainty around players who had been considered safe bets heading into last season. Whenever you have a significant level of uncertainty surrounding a player, you can find value but there's plenty of risk of failure too. Owners dismissed concerns about shoulder problems to Matt Kemp and Adrian Gonzalez in 2012 and 2013, and they paid the price. Neither of them resembled anything close to their primes until the second half of 2014. So you look for players like that who could provide first-round power at fourth- or fifth-round prices.

A third type of player to target for affordable power is one who might not open the season in the major leagues. The utility of this approach depends a lot on what kind of league you're participating in. If you are in a league with big rosters and the ability to keep players from year to year, then you'll have to delve into the lower levels of the minors to find future value because most of the high-level prospects are already claimed.

On the other hand, if you're in a more standard league that starts fresh each year and has relatively few reserve spots, you'll have to weigh whether having essentially a dead spot on your roster for a month or two (or more)

is worth the potential upside a young player offers. Those who stashed Mike Trout on their rosters in 2012 got the ultimate payoff, but the results are not usually so black and white.

In order to stretch out the time before the player can go to arbitration, organizations routinely wait until June or July to promote their best prospects. They are often elite talents (like George Springer) who don't break camp and go undrafted or are available in the final three or four rounds of drafts. Using a late-round draft pick on high upside power sources is an efficient way to maximize value. Expectations should be low, but the players can be cheap power supplements. Prospects like Miguel Sano, Michael Taylor, Peter O'Brien and D.J. Peterson could contribute in 2015.

Regardless of which approach you choose, or if it is some combination of them all, fantasy baseball owners need to adapt to a world with fewer home runs to go around, and that starts with the draft.

Chris Mitchell is a staff writer for RotoExperts.com and host of a fantasy sports show on the Fantasy Sports Television Network. You can find him on Twitter at @CJMitch73.



CLIFF WELCH

Many people will target Chris Davis for a bounceback season, but he comes with risks

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POWER OUTAGE

As this chart shows, offense in general and power in particular has been on the decline since peaking in the early 2000s. This chart tracks several offensive categories since 1998, the first year Major League Baseball had 30 teams and of course the year of the great home runs chase. Now that baseball has cracked down on performance-enhancing drugs, power numbers have been in steady decline and show no signs of turning around, so fantasy players must plan accordingly.

Year	BA	OBP	SLG	R/G	R	HR
1998	.266	.335	.420	4.79	23,297	5,064
1999	.271	.345	.434	5.08	24,691	5,528
2000	.270	.345	.437	5.14	24,971	5,693
2001	.264	.332	.427	4.78	23,199	5,458
2002	.261	.331	.417	4.62	22,408	5,059
2003	.264	.333	.422	4.73	22,978	5,207
2004	.266	.335	.428	4.81	23,376	5,451
2005	.264	.330	.419	4.59	22,325	5,017
2006	.269	.337	.432	4.86	23,599	5,386
2007	.268	.336	.423	4.80	23,322	4,957
2008	.264	.333	.416	4.65	22,585	4,878
2009	.262	.333	.418	4.61	22,419	5,042
2010	.257	.325	.403	4.38	21,308	4,613
2011	.255	.321	.399	4.28	20,808	4,552
2012	.255	.319	.405	4.32	21,017	4,934
2013	.253	.318	.396	4.17	20,255	4,661
2014	.251	.314	.386	4.07	19,761	4,186

JOHN WILLIAMSON

Spiking strikeout rate alters player evaluation

BY MATT EDDY

The major league strikeout rate has climbed steadily each season since 2005, reaching a high-water mark of 20.4 percent of all plate appearances in 2014. What you might not realize is that the strikeout rate also is higher today at each classification of the full-season minors than it was a decade ago, though those trendlines are not nearly so linear.

See Chart 1, next page.

Whereas the major league strikeout rate sat at 16.5 percent in 2005 and climbs straight up from there, the various full-season minor league rates ranged from roughly 18-19 percent in 2005 to roughly 19-20 percent today. Low Class A batters consistently strike out the most often, though their big league counterparts have matched or exceeded them in both 2012 and 2014 as the march for higher ground continues unabated.

The on-base percentage also is lower today at each step of the full-season ladder, most dramatically in the majors and at both Class A levels.

On-Base Percentage, Today And 10 Years Ago

Level	2014	2005	Difference
Majors	.314	.330	-16 points
Triple-A	.338	.344	-6 points
Double-A	.326	.333	-7 points
High Class A	.331	.342	-11 points
Low Class A	.326	.336	-10 points

Keep in mind that the loss of 16 OBP points in the majors in a decade translates to 16 additional outs per 100 PAs, and with all those extra outs being made, many stemming from additional strikeouts, the rate of extra bases per 100 PAs fell to 10-year lows across the board in 2014.

See Chart 2, next page.

Throughout the game's most-recent expansion era, beginning with the Marlins and Rockies in 1993, teams have increasingly become more tolerant of batter strikeouts if it comes packaged with corresponding extra-base output. However, the major league game now has seen large drops in power output for three straight seasons—even when batters conclude an at-bat by making contact and, therefore, not striking out.

To that point, extra bases on contact (*see footnote) in the major leagues registered at 19.2 per 100 "contact outcomes" in 2012, then fell to 18.2 in 2013, then fell to 17.3 in 2014. In other words, that's about two fewer extra bases every 100 "contact outcomes" for the average major league batter in 2014 compared with 2012. If a batter makes contact in 400 trips to the plate during a season, then he now collects eight fewer extra bases—which is equivalent to two home runs and two doubles—than he did as recently as 2012.

Granted, these deleterious on-contact effects are not as evident in the minors—at least not yet. The Triple-A and Double-A are largely unchanged from 2012, while the Class A levels are down only slightly from three years ago.

Extra Bases Per 100 Times Making Contact

Level	2012	2013	2014
Majors	19.2	18.2	17.3
Triple-A	17.9	17.4	18.1
Double-A	16.4	16.5	16.1
High Class A	17.1	16.9	16.6
Low Class A	16.0	15.2	15.3

So while it used to be true that the game's rising strikeout rate did not negatively affect power on contact, recent trends in that department suggest that is no longer the case.

In the rest of this piece, we will explore some of the ways these strikeout and extra-base trends might affect team-building philosophies and player development.

Taking Cues

If imitation truly is the sincerest form of flattery, then we may see more clubs begin to embrace hitters with higher contact rates, even if it comes at the expense of some power.

"I think because of the Giants-Royals matchup in the World Series last year that there will be something of a premium based on contact with players," one front office executive said, "and I think in a short series where, theoretically, you are facing elite arms, the ability to put the ball in play gives you a better



Hunter Pence and the Giants have thrived by making consistent contact in the postseason during the best run in San Francisco history

opportunity to score runs."

The Royals had the lowest batter strikeout rate (16.2 percent) in the majors in 2014, and the Giants ranked 13th-lowest at 19.3 percent. Pitchers are excluded from these strikeout rates to level the playing field between leagues.

Generally speaking, teams that make more contact have advanced farther in the playoffs during the past five seasons, a period during which run-scoring has fallen sharply. Major league teams scored 4.61 runs per game as recently as 2009, while today they score 4.07.

The two National League franchises that have struck out the least frequently in the past five seasons are the Cardinals (17.5 percent) and Giants (18.4). Those two teams have won all five NL pennants in that time.

Their American League counterparts would be the Rangers (16.2 percent) and Tigers (18.0), who have the second- and third-lowest strikeout rates in the league since 2010. Those two clubs have won three pennants, while the No. 1 Royals (16.2 percent) won the 2014 AL flag.

All told, the Cardinals, Giants, Tigers and Rangers have accounted for eight of the 10 team World Series appearances since 2010. What's more, Detroit narrowly missed advancing to 2013 World Series, falling to the Red Sox in six games in the AL Championship Series.

Here's where all LCS participants of the 2010s have ranked in their respective leagues in terms of lowest batter strikeout rate.

Year	NLCS W: SO%	NLCS L: SO%	ALCS W: SO%	ALCS L: SO%
2010	Giants: 5	Phillies: 2	Rangers: 4	Yankees: 8
2011	Cardinals: 1	Brewers: 4	Rangers: 1	Tigers: 10
2012	Giants: 1	Cardinals: 3	Tigers: 5	Yankees: 7
2013	Cardinals: 2	Dodgers: 4	Red Sox: 11	Tigers: 1
2014	Giants: 6	Cardinals: 1	Royals: 1	Orioles: 11

The 2013 Red Sox stand out as the outlier in this group. Every other LCS winner's batters ranked comfortably in the

first division in terms of making contact.

Looking To The Future

Front offices around the majors are only too familiar with the rising tide of strikeouts, but the issue hasn't been studied thoroughly in the minor leagues.

We would naturally expect to see attrition to a batter's contact rate as he advances to higher levels. Among other things, the pitchers throw better pitches with better control and the umpires are more efficient (or more closely-monitored) at the highest levels.

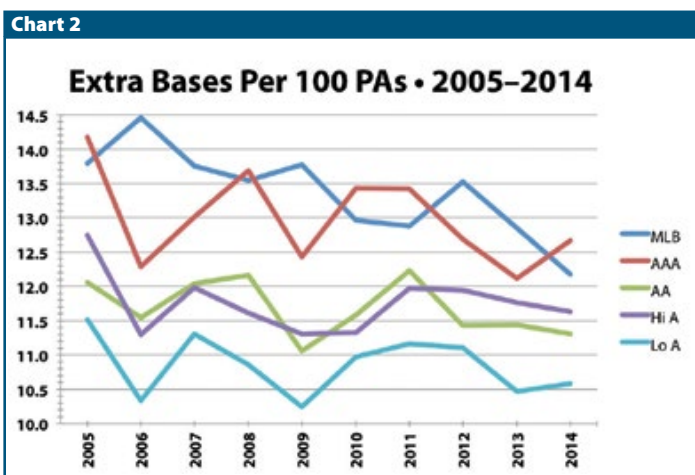
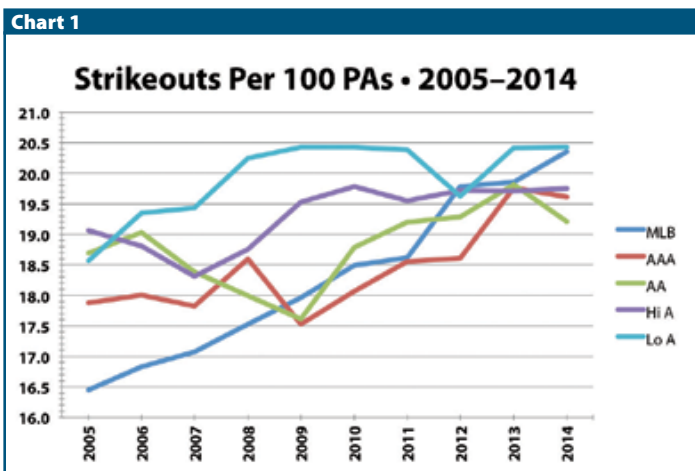
People in player-development departments across the game tend not to think of batter strikeout rates in absolute terms. Crossing a particular threshold won't result in banishment or won't typically put a player on a do-not-acquire list.

"We consider context heavily when it comes to evaluating batter strikeout rates," one front-office executive said. "We adjust for league, for park, for age, for power production. We have no magic cutoff we have established, though we acknowledge that a 24-year-old with a 35-percent strikeout rate at Double-A has little room for improvement."

Particularly interesting is the extreme strikeout rates that have persisted at the low Class A level. Even when the big league strikeout rate was a comparatively tame 15.9 percent in 1993, the low Class A leagues checked in at 19.2 percent, which is more or less in line with today's standard of 20.4 percent.

In other words, wait to see how a strikeout-prone young slugger adjusts to higher levels before writing him off in low Class A. For example, Marlins right fielder Giancarlo Stanton struck out 28 percent of the time at Greensboro in 2008, one year out of the draft. He improved dramatically in two follow-up seasons and now stands as one of the game's premier sluggers—and its highest-paid player.

The two most similar hitters in this year's Top 100 Prospects class probably would be a pair of hard-hitting third basemen. The Rangers' Joey Gallo whiffed 37 percent of the time at



Hickory in 2013, and the Twins' Miguel Sano struck out 26 percent of the time at Beloit in 2012. Here's how that trio of young sluggers fared in terms of strikeout rate at their Class A stops, and how their rates compared with the league average (an index score of 100 is average).

Year-Over-Year Change To Strikeout Rate				
Player	Low-A	Index	High-A	Index
Stanton	28.3	71	21.4	89
Sano	26.0	75	25.1	74
Gallo	37.0	58	26.0	76

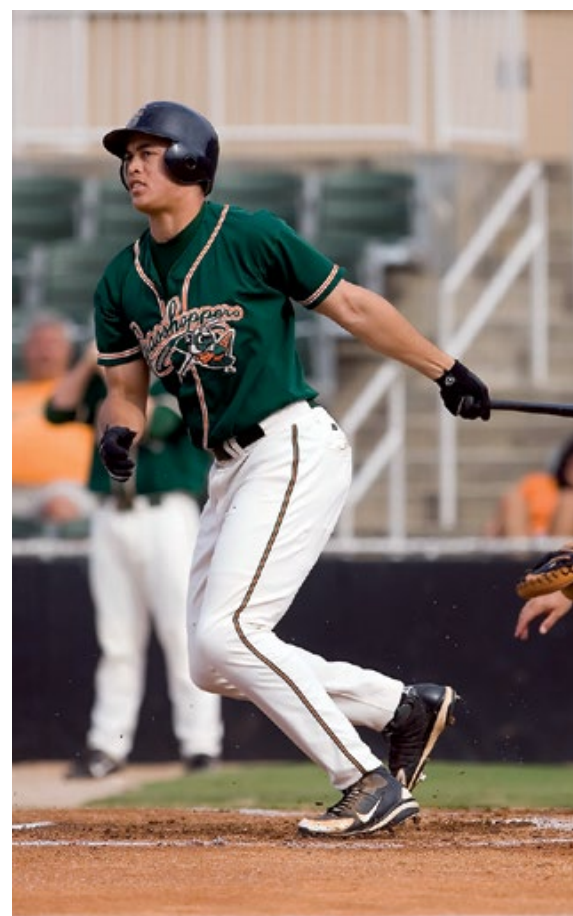
We see that Stanton and Gallo improved their strikeout-rate index dramatically at high Class A, while Sano more or less maintained his rate, though all three remain comfortably below the league average in that regard (but well above-average in terms of power output).

The important thing to keep in mind when evaluating statistics for players like Stanton, Gallo and Sano is that the typical strikeout rate at low Class A hovers near 20 percent. Not only that, but hitters there have ample room to improve and can take huge strides forward in their development with a full season under the belts.

"A lot of the high strikeout rate at low-A we attribute to younger hitters and bigger strike zones. Everything is contextual," the front office executive said. "In terms of how we view our prospects internally, we believe year-over-year improvement (to strikeout rate) is the best indicator, though it's not an easy area to make a big improvement."

"While it's not a fixed skill, it's also difficult to improve a batter's strike-zone discipline or contact rate. And as to how much dramatic improvement is expected, well, it's probably not huge."

**Extra bases on contact is equal to $(2B + 3B*2 + HR*3)$ divided by $(AB - SO + SF)$*



When he went by Mike Stanton, baseball's best slugger struck out often, but he has made adjustments

FEATURED PAST ATHLETES

NICK CASTELLANOS

UA Debut: 2009
Draft: 2010 Draft Pick/
1st Round, 6'4"/210
HS Stats: Archbishop
McCarthy HS, 6'4"/205
Hometown: Davie, FL

ZACK WHEELER

UA Debut: 2008
Draft: 2009 Draft Pick/
1st Round, 6'4"/195
HS Stats: East Paulding
HS, 6'4"/185
Hometown: Smyrna, GA

KEVIN GAUSMAN

UA Debut: 2009
Draft: 2012 Draft Pick/
1st Round, 6'3"/190
HS Stats: Grandview HS,
6'3"/180
Hometown: Centennial, CO

SCOOTER GENNETT

UA Debut: 2008
Draft: 2009 Draft Pick/
16th Round, 5'10"/170
HS Stats: Sarasota HS
5'10"/170
Hometown: Sarasota, FL

NICK FRANKLIN

UA Debut: 2008
Draft: 2009 Draft Pick/
1st Round, 6'1"/195
HS Stats: Lake Brantley HS
6'1"/170
Hometown: Longwood, FL

TYLER MATZEK

UA Debut: 2008
Draft: 2009 Draft Pick/
1st Round, 6'3"/210
HS Stats: Capistrano Valley
HS 6'3"/185
Hometown: Mission Viejo, CA

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Red Sox splurge on record bonus for Moncada

BY BEN BADLER

Yoan Moncada, one of the top young Cuban players to leave the island in recent years, agreed to terms with the Red Sox on a \$31.5 million bonus.

Moncada, 19, is a 6-foot, 210-pound switch-hitter who projects as a second or third baseman in the big leagues, though he will start his career in the minors, with a Class A assignment most likely. He has several tools that grade out now or project to be a 60 or better on the 20-80 scale. His speed, raw power and arm strength are all plus tools, and he projects as a future plus hitter. Once Moncada passes a physical and his contract becomes official, he will rank as the No. 10 prospect in baseball, making him Boston's new No. 1 prospect.

Since Moncada is subject to the international bonus pools, he was required to sign a minor league contract. That meant the Red Sox had to put all of his money into the signing bonus, which is a record for any player. Since it's a minor league contract, it doesn't account for any future salaries, including his arbitration years.

Aside from those future salaries, the total cost to the Red Sox will be \$63 million, since the organization must pay a 100 percent overage tax for exceeding its international bonus pools. The overage tax is payable to the commissioner's office by July 15. The Red

Sox had already gone over their international bonus pool previously on July 2 last year, so they were already prevented from signing any player for more than \$300,000 for the next two signing periods once the 2015-16 international signing period begins on July 2.

Despite his youth, Moncada has excited scouts with his tools and performance at international tournaments for years. The buzz started in October 2010 at the COPABE Pan American 16U Championships in Mexico, and it continued the next year at the 16U World Championships in Mexico, where he batted .417/.563/.667 in seven games and was named to the tournament's all-star team at third base.

As an 18-year-old, he joined the Cuban national team in the Netherlands in July 2013 to play in the World Port Tournament, though he played sparingly there. Two months later, he was a standout on the Cuban junior national team in Taiwan at the 18U World Championships, where he batted .375/.483/.542 in 29 plate appearances, leading the Cuban team in batting average, OBP and slugging. He faced several top prospects from the 2014 draft in that tournament, including Rangers righthander Luis Ortiz, Indians lefthander Justus Sheffield and also righthander Jacob Nix, who agreed to terms with the Astros last year as a fifth-round pick but did not sign in part of the Brady Aiken debacle.



Cuban infielder Yoan Moncada immediately becomes Boston's new No. 1 prospect

"He's electric," one scout said. "When I saw him at the 18U World Championship in Taiwan, he did what good hitters do. He has tools, he's athletic and he has a chance to hit for power. It's bat speed that you don't see except from the select few. The guy has different bat speed from everyone else, period. It's a beautiful swing too from the left side, which is better than his righthanded swing."

Meanwhile, back in Cuba, Moncada was tearing up the junior national leagues in Cuba. In the country's 16U national league in 2011, Moncada hit .500/.643/.918 in 158 trips to the plate. He led the league in batting average, OBP, slugging, home runs (8) and walks (37) and stole 15 bases without getting caught. When he moved up to Cuba's 18U national league in 2012, he again ranked first in batting average, OBP and slugging with a .434/.543/.648 slash line in 152 plate appearances and stole 20 bases in 24 attempts.

Moncada made his Serie Nacional debut in 2012-13 for Cienfuegos, where he played second base in an infield with Jose Abreu at first base and Erisbel Arruebarrena at shortstop. Even at 17, Moncada hit well, batting .283/.414/.348 in 172 plate appearances. He showed his speed, with 13 stolen bases in 18 tries, and during the skills competition of the all-star game by beating Rusney Castillo and Guillermo Heredia in a race from home to first, and winning another race around the bases.

During the 2013-14 season, Moncada's second and final year in Serie Nacional, he batted .273/.365/.406 in 195 plate appearances as an 18-year-old. It's been more than a year since Moncada has played in a competitive game, with his last action coming in December 2013 when his Cienfuegos team was eliminated at the end of the first half of the season.

Caribbean Series Highlights

Usually when scouts watch the Cuban national team, it's at an international tournament over the summer, which is the offseason for Cuba.

That's what makes the World Baseball Classic and the Caribbean Series so valuable. At the Caribbean Series in Puerto Rico in February, not only were scouts able to watch the Cubans competing against professional players mostly in the Double-A to Triple-A talent pool, they also get to see them when

they should all be in game-ready shape.

Cuba won the Caribbean Series, beating Mexico 3-2 in the championship game—though thanks to a wonky round-robin format in the five-team tournament, Cuba went just 3-3, while 4-1 Venezuela got bounced in the semifinals.

While the team Cuba sent was technically not its national team, it was pretty close. Pinar Del Rio, the team that won the Serie Nacional championship in Cuba last year, was officially the team that represented Cuba, but the squad was heavily reinforced with the best players from around the island. Scouts were generally underwhelmed with the team, but there were a few players who stood out.

YULIESKI GOURRIEL, 2B: While scouts left Puerto Rico underwhelmed with the major league-caliber talent on Cuba's roster, Gourriel was a clear exception. The No. 1 player in Cuba, Gourriel performed well, showed off several above-average tools and came through in the clutch, hitting a solo home run in the top of the eighth inning in the championship game to give Cuba a 3-1 lead that proved crucial as they held on to win 3-2.

At 30, Gourriel still has plus bat speed and consistently drives the ball with authority. His hits were well struck and even several of his outs were roped right at a fielder. Gourriel's offensive game was hardly a revelation to anyone who's followed him, but the Caribbean Series offered an uncommon glimpse into his defense at second base. Gourriel is primarily a third baseman in Cuba, but in Puerto Rico he played exclusively at second base, a position he does have history with, including at the Central American and Caribbean Games in Mexico in November. Gourriel's defensive skills (especially his range) fit better at third, but he played a solid second base and made some good plays with his instincts and body control.

HECTOR MENDOZA, RHP: Mendoza has pitched more outside of Cuba this year than he has in Serie Nacional. The 20-year-old went to Japan to play for the Yomiuri Giants last summer, but he never pitched in a game for their top team. When he returned to Cuba, he wasn't pitching in any games, though he did pitch in Mexico at the Central American and Caribbean Games in November. He pitched briefly in Serie Nacional after that, with just 4 1/3 innings of relief for Isla De La Juventud. In Puerto Rico, Cuba leaned heavily on Mendoza, especially with righthander Vladimir Gutierrez defecting during the tournament. Over three relief appearances, Mendoza threw six shutout innings, including 63 pitches over 3 2/3 innings to seal an extra-inning victory over Puerto Rico. Mendoza had trouble throwing strikes that game, getting himself into and out of trouble, but he filled up the zone in his other two outings, touching 94 mph and flashing an average curveball.

FREDERICH CEPEDA, DH: Cepeda is 34, but he showed why he is still one of the premier hitters in Cuba, winning the tournament MVP award and coming through in the clutch. He had a huge game in the semifinals against Venezuela, going 4-for-5 with two doubles and a triple, punishing Venezuelan pitchers from both sides of the plate. Cepeda stays calm under pressure with a mature, disciplined hitting approach and the ability to go with the pitch where it's located and drive it with authority to all fields. Cepeda probably only has a few good years left at best, and it's unlikely he will ever wear a major league uniform, but the Caribbean Series was another moment to add to his career highlights.

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Moncada deal adds to push for world draft

BY J.J. COOPER

When the Reds signed then 21-year-old lefthander Aroldis Chapman to a \$30 million contract in 2010, it created waves for the amount of the deal—no Cuban defector had signed for more than \$11 million in the previous eight years. But what was equally notable was who were the final teams in the bidding. The Reds edged out the Athletics, Marlins, Nationals and Blue Jays.

Chapman's contract was a big one, but it was constructed in a way that meant any team could afford him. Chapman's contract included a \$16 million bonus that was paid out over 10 years. The rest of the deal was from major league salaries that would be paid out for a pitcher who would presumably be earning those deals pitching in the big leagues.

When 19-year-old Cuban infielder Yoan Moncada agreed to his deal with the Red Sox in late February, he signed for \$31.5 million, with another \$31.5 million payable to Major League Baseball by June for going over the team's international bonus allotment.

The Red Sox ended up beating the Yankees and Dodgers to sign Moncada. Lower revenue teams need not have bothered. The bonus? Most teams could handle that since it could be spread out over multiple years, but a number of teams don't have the cash flow to cut a \$30 million-plus check to Major League Baseball for the bonus penalty. That's as much or more than some teams get in local television revenue for an entire season.

It was hard to find a team that didn't have scouts who turned in Moncada as a premium talent. But many teams now feel shut out of the market for younger Cubans, those who trigger a bonus penalty if their signing forces a team over their international signing allotment.

"Now only four or five teams are doing anything (with Cubans subject to the international spending allotments)," said an international scout.

For a big revenue team, there is virtually zero opportunity cost for bringing in Moncada. Spending money on him doesn't crowd out any other options. Signing him didn't cost the Red Sox draft picks. He didn't

prevent them from making significant free agent acquisitions this offseason; the Red Sox signed Pablo Sandoval and Hanley Ramirez, two of the top free agents on the market. His contract will wrap up somewhere between age 25 and 27, so there is no worry about spending money on the downside of his career. And Moncada's bonus does not cost toward luxury tax calculations.

The Red Sox will be prohibited from signing any international player 23 years old or younger for more than \$300,000 in the next two years, but that was already true because they had already exceeded their international signing allotment.

Big Money, Big Results

It's an excellent time to be a Cuban player looking to sign with a major league team.

In the past year, Rusney Castillo has signed a \$72 million deal with the Red Sox. Yasmany Tomas has signed a \$68.5 million contract with the Diamondbacks, and righthander Raisel Iglesias signed a \$27 million deal to join the Reds.

And among younger players subject to MLB's restrictions on international signing bonuses, Moncada has signed a \$31.5 million deal that effectively cost \$63 million when the penalty is added.

Players considered lower-level prospects like Roberto Baldoquin (Angels, \$8 million plus an equivalent penalty) and Yoan Lopez (Diamondbacks, \$8.25 million plus an equivalent penalty) have also landed deals that top the amount spent on any draft pick or any other Latin American player signed on the amateur free agent market.

Since Chapman's \$30 million signing in 2010, teams have committed nearly \$400 million to land Cuban players on the free agent market. There have been busts among recent signings: Yunesky Maya, Gerardo Concepcion and Erisbel Arruebarrena are three that come to mind. But overall, teams that spend money on Cuban talent have been handsomely rewarded in recent years.

Chapman is one of the best closers in the game and a three-time all-star. Yoenis Cespedes has made an all-star team and finished second in AL rookie of the year voting



Yasmany Tomas, who signed with Arizona, is one of a number of Cubans to land big deals recently

in 2012.

The success of those two seemed to open the floodgates to spending on Cuban talent. Not long after Cespedes received a \$36 million deal, the Dodgers spent \$42 million on Yasiel Puig, even though most teams had few looks at the talented outfielder.

Puig has also been a rookie of the year runner-up and an all-star and should be just entering his prime as a 24-year-old. Jose Abreu led the American League in slugging percentage as he was named Baseball America's Rookie of the Year and finished in the top five in MVP balloting. Jorge Soler made a splash in his big league debut last September, and Roenis Elias has proven to be an astute pickup for the Mariners at a bargain basement \$350,000 signing bonus.

Leonys Martin and Adeiny Hechavarria have also been useful regulars from this most recent wave of Cuban imports.

Suppressing Bonuses

Teams have spent a lot of money recently on Cubans, and a lot of it has proven to be money well spent. But as we have seen multiple times in past years, owners aren't ever thrilled about the idea of a free and unfettered market for amateur talent that sends bonus payments soaring. The Moncada deal is likely one further step closer to bringing in an international draft.

The day after Moncada's deal was reported, commissioner Rob Manfred told Fox Sports' Jon Morosi, "It makes all the sense in the world to have a single method of entry."

Translated, that means that the commissioner sees the logic in having all players go through the draft to get into professional baseball.

This isn't the first time that a big money signing has signaled the potential for future



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changes. Time after time, when teams spend big money for players other than veteran free agents, new rules to tamp down spending quickly follow.

The June draft itself was set up after previous attempts to control bonuses through so-called "bonus baby" and Rule 5 draft eligibility rules failed to slow their rise. Rich Reichert's \$200,000 bonus in 1964 was the final straw, and the draft arrived in 1965.

That wasn't the last time big bonuses led to big reactions. When 1991 No. 1 overall pick Brian Taylor signed with the Yankees for \$1.55 million a quarter century ago, baseball's owners sounded the alarms.

As the owners saw it, if a high school pitcher who was not expected to head to college could sign a deal for more than the salary of most big leaguers of the time, massive changes had to be made.

During the following offseason, MLB unilaterally adopted a rule that allowed teams to retain rights to a high school player for five years. The idea was to take away any leverage any draftee might have. The player could sign out of high school or go to college, but at any point over the next five years, he was subject to a take it or leave it offer from the team that drafted him.

It was a decision that was never really supported by those who worked in scouting. A survey of the 28 scouting directors of the time found that 21 of them opposed the rule. But they were overruled by general managers and especially the owners.

The new rule, a spasm of overreaction, was quickly wiped away. An arbitrator ruled a month after the 1992 draft that the unilateral adoption of such a sweeping change was illegal without the agreement of the union, because draft picks are tied to free agent compensation and thus affect major league players. MLB tried numerous other times in the succeeding years to make changes on its own, but arbitrators consistently ruled against ownership.

Baseball's leadership appears to have matured since then. The 1992 draft changes came just a few years after owners illegally colluded to avoid signing free agents and just before a work stoppage in 1994-95 that cost a World Series.

Since 1995, however, baseball has enjoyed labor peace, and in the latest renewal of the Collective Bargaining Agreement, players and owners agreed on significant changes to amateur draft rules and set the stage for a worldwide draft with new international spending rules, including the current international signing allotments.



Cuban slugger Jose Abreu made the White Sox's \$68 million contract pay off almost immediately

And after the Rangers spent more than \$50 million for a posting fee to acquire Yu Darvish from a Japanese team, MLB pushed through a new system that capped posting fees at \$20 million and managed to get Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball league to agree to it.

In the current labor agreement, MLB could have adopted an international draft in 2013 or 2014 simply by notifying the Players Association a year in advance. The details still have not been worked out, however, so baseball continues to operate without an international draft.

Under the current CBA, an international draft cannot be set up before 2017 without getting a new agreement from the union, but the union has shown no real issues with approving an international draft in the past, so that may not be a big hurdle.

Figuring out the many details of the logistics of such a draft is a much bigger hurdle,

but with more teams feeling shut out of the bidding for the top Cuban players, there are more proponents of a draft than in years' past.

"It has to happen. We're all at such a disadvantage now," said one front-office executive from a lower-revenue team.

But more important than that, the fact that teams are blowing through the international spending limits and taking the penalties that come with that decision will likely drive MLB to adopt new measures to stop that spending. By the end up this year's international signing period, teams will pay roughly \$75 million in taxes for exceeding international spending allotments. Teams are taxed on a 100 percent basis for their spending above their signing allotment.

In the past, that kind of unfettered spending has always led owners to look for new rules to slow the spending, and it likely will again.

AROUND SPRING TRAINING

■ Even several weeks before minor league spring training officially began, there was a lot of prospect news coming out of Florida and Arizona.

Most notable was the presence of shortstop **Trea Turner** in Padres camp. The Padres' 2014 first-round pick is the player to be named in the three-team offseason trade that sent **Wil Myers** to the Padres and **Steven Souza** to the Rays, and eventually Turner to the Nationals. Turner's portion of the trade cannot be completed until June 13, a year after his first contract was signed.

When the trade happened, Turner's agent **Jeff Barry** told FoxSports.com that it was "unconscionable" that Turner would have to remain for six months with a team that would eventually be shipping him elsewhere. But Turner told reporters at spring training that he will just go about his work.

"My goal's always to play at the highest level I possibly can, and this offseason that's kind of all I focused on," Turner told the San Diego Union Tribune. "There's a lot of things out of my control—this trade and anything of that nature. I try to not pay attention to it as much as I can. I'm just ready to put it behind me and start playing."

The Padres said they will handle Turner's development just like that of any other player.

■ **Max Pentecost**, the second of Toronto's first-round picks last June and the No. 11 pick overall, had surgery on his right shoulder and will miss the beginning of the 2015 season, Sportsnet.ca reported.

It was the second surgery since October for the former Kennesaw State catcher. He had surgery following the 2014 season to repair a partial tear in his right labrum, but a second procedure, performed by **Dr. James Andrews**, was necessary. Sportsnet.ca reported that he is scheduled to begin throwing again within three months and might begin other baseball activities sooner.

The righthanded hitter, 22, had a successful if truncated start to his pro career, batting .324/.330/.419 in short-season ball. At his best, Pentecost has an easy, quick and short stroke conducive to line drives to all fields. He flashes above-average raw power to his pull side but his swing path is geared more toward line drives to the gaps. Behind the plate, Pentecost has a quick release, but it remains to be seen what impact the surgeries will have on his arm, which was rated plus prior to the draft.

■ Mariners righthander **Victor Sanchez** was in intensive care in Venezuela after a swimming accident. Sanchez had cranial surgery to relieve pressure from swelling after he was struck in the head by a boat propeller while swimming at a beach in Carupano, Venezuela. According to multiple reports in Venezuelan newspapers, Sanchez was in stable condition, but faced a significant recovery process from a life-threatening injury. He was transferred to a Caracas hospital by an air ambulance on Feb. 20.

Sanchez has been one of the more prominent pitchers to be signed out of Venezuela in recent years. Seattle signed him for \$2.5 million in 2011, and he moved quickly through the minors. Sanchez was one of the youngest players in the Southern League in 2014 as a 19-year-old, when he went 7-6, 4.19 for Double-A Jackson. He did not make the Mariners' Top 30 Prospects list this offseason.



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San Francisco
Giants



Brian Kenny
MLB
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Diamondbacks



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DeMarini's evolution continues with custom

BY JOSH NORRIS

HILLSBORO, ORE.

Even as a team sport, baseball has slowly become more and more individualized. Players have their own at-bat music, which they savor as they saunter to home plate. Some, like Fernando Rodney and his bow and arrow, have their own celebrations after a save. And of course, the elite players have their own shoes and gear, which fans can purchase.

Now, thanks to the bat maker DeMarini, some college teams will have their own customized metal bats this season—and soon fans will be able to get in on the fun for themselves.

Six college teams will be outfitted with the custom metal bats this season: Vanderbilt, Louisiana State, Arizona State, Oklahoma

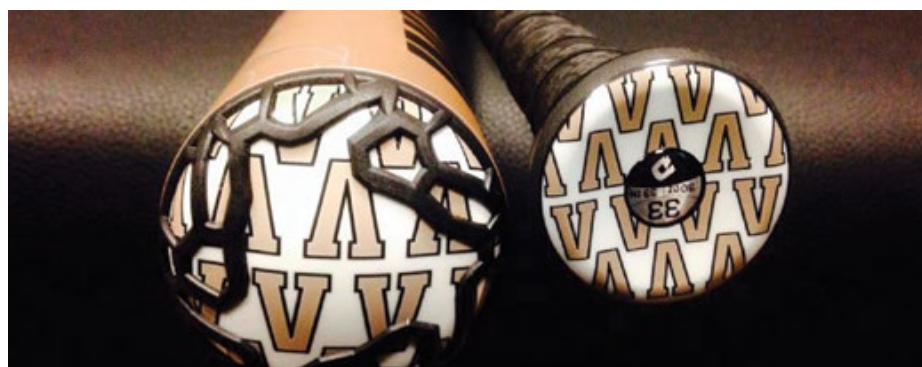
State, Tennessee and UC Irvine.

So, what exactly is a custom bat?

It's a personally designed bat, complete with the colors and flair that best represent you and your team. If that weren't enough, the knob and end cap can bear whichever graphic you'd like.

Baseball America recently took a tour of DeMarini's new factory in Hillsboro, where each bat is made—from aluminum cone that becomes the barrel, to the paint, the decals and finally the end cap and knob—and came away with a bat of our own.

The company's new website, designed specifically for customization, is www.demarini-custombats.com, and it has all the tools needed to get started. You can start from scratch or pick a design template, and then add your own touches. For instance, you could add your name, your team logo, or your jersey



Vanderbilt is one team that will be swinging DeMarini's new custom metal bats this season

number on either the end cap or the knob, and design the bat to bear your school's colors.

For what it's worth, working on behalf of BA, I went with a UCLA-esque purple and gold design, with "BA" on the knob, "Baseball America" on the end cap, and an all-American bat wrap.

Back To The Beginning

The company began in the garage of Ray DeMarini, who started the empire by design-

ing, of all things, custom bats for his friends.

The bats he made then look nothing like the ones the company churns out today, obviously. Instead, the barrels were simply a shiny silver color with "Ray DeMarini" written toward the end of the barrel and the player's name below in smaller type.

Twenty-five years and whole lot of success later, the company has come back around to where it all started. And they've done so with their founder's vision—that any ballplayer should have the ability to use the products the pros use—in mind.

"We're still doing it for the reasons Ray would've done it for," Jerry Garnett, DeMarini's national marketing manager in Hillsboro, said during a multimedia presentation that preceded the tour of the factory where the custom bats are born.

And if you'd like to test your bat, or one like it, once it's made, there's an on-site batting cage—equipped with TrackMan and HitTrax—for just that purpose.

If you are lucky enough to take a tour of DeMarini's facilities, two buildings separated by just a few miles, you'll see posters and old magazine covers featuring Ray DeMarini.

And although DeMarini was the brains—and name—behind the brand, there was another, less public but equally important man who helped develop the technology that made the company's bats some of the most explosive in the business.

His name is Mike Eggiman, and he hadn't dabbled in bat-making until DeMarini came calling. Eggiman was a mechanical engineer with the shipping company Freightline.

In the confines of his normal job, Eggiman managed and optimized the loads trucks had to carry. That weight-distribution knowledge transferred well into construction of bats, and helped contribute to the development of the double-wall technology, and thus the coveted trampoline effect, which debuted in 1993.

Seven years later, DeMarini was purchased by Wilson Sporting Goods. Four years after that, Arizona State, with the blessing of stand-outs Dustin Pedroia and Jeff Larish, became the first major college program to sign on.

Two years after that, Oregon State, armed with the company's new Voodoo model, won its first of two consecutive College World Series titles, and last season Vanderbilt used DeMarini bats to win its first CWS crown.

Besides baseball, DeMarini also has holds on the softball markets, and is the No. 1 brand among fast-pitch teams. Of the top college teams, eight—Oregon, Michigan, Baylor, Washington, Minnesota, Auburn, Tulsa and DePaul—use the company's bats.

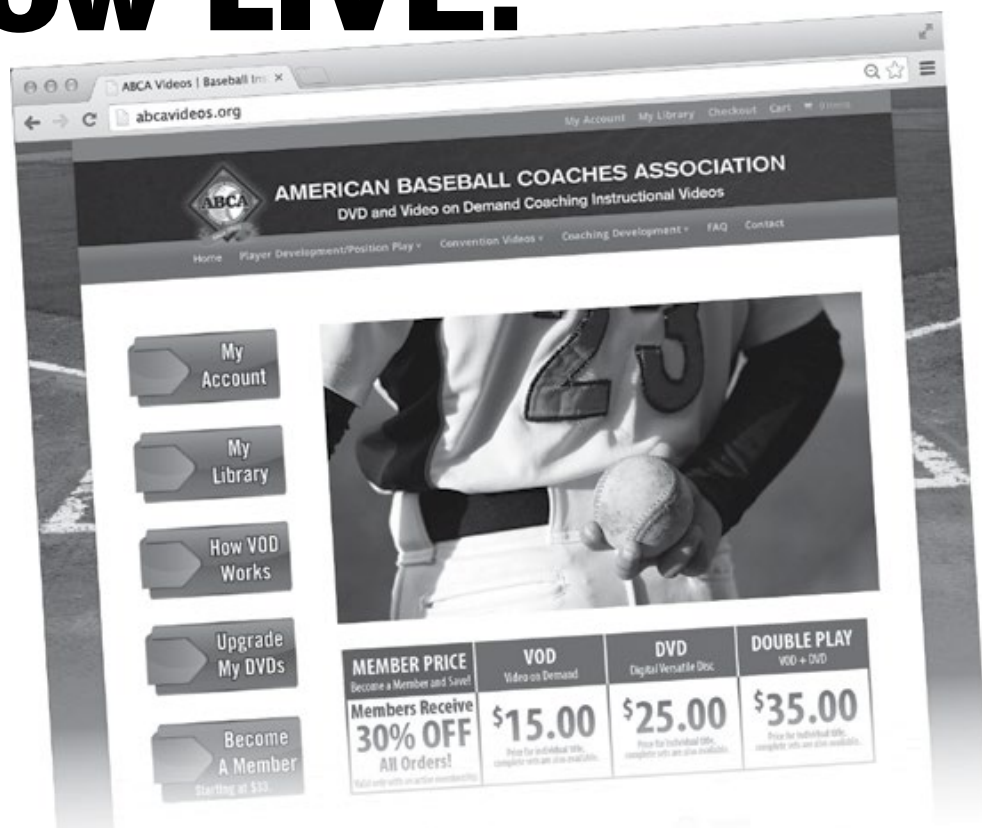
After all that success, it would have been easy to move their production plants somewhere more cost-effective. Instead, they're still in Hillsboro, a city of just less than 100,000.

"We like where we live," Garnett said, "and we love what we do."

Ray DeMarini succumbed to brain cancer in 2001, but with every bat that rolls out of Hillsboro and into a young player's hands, his legacy lives on.

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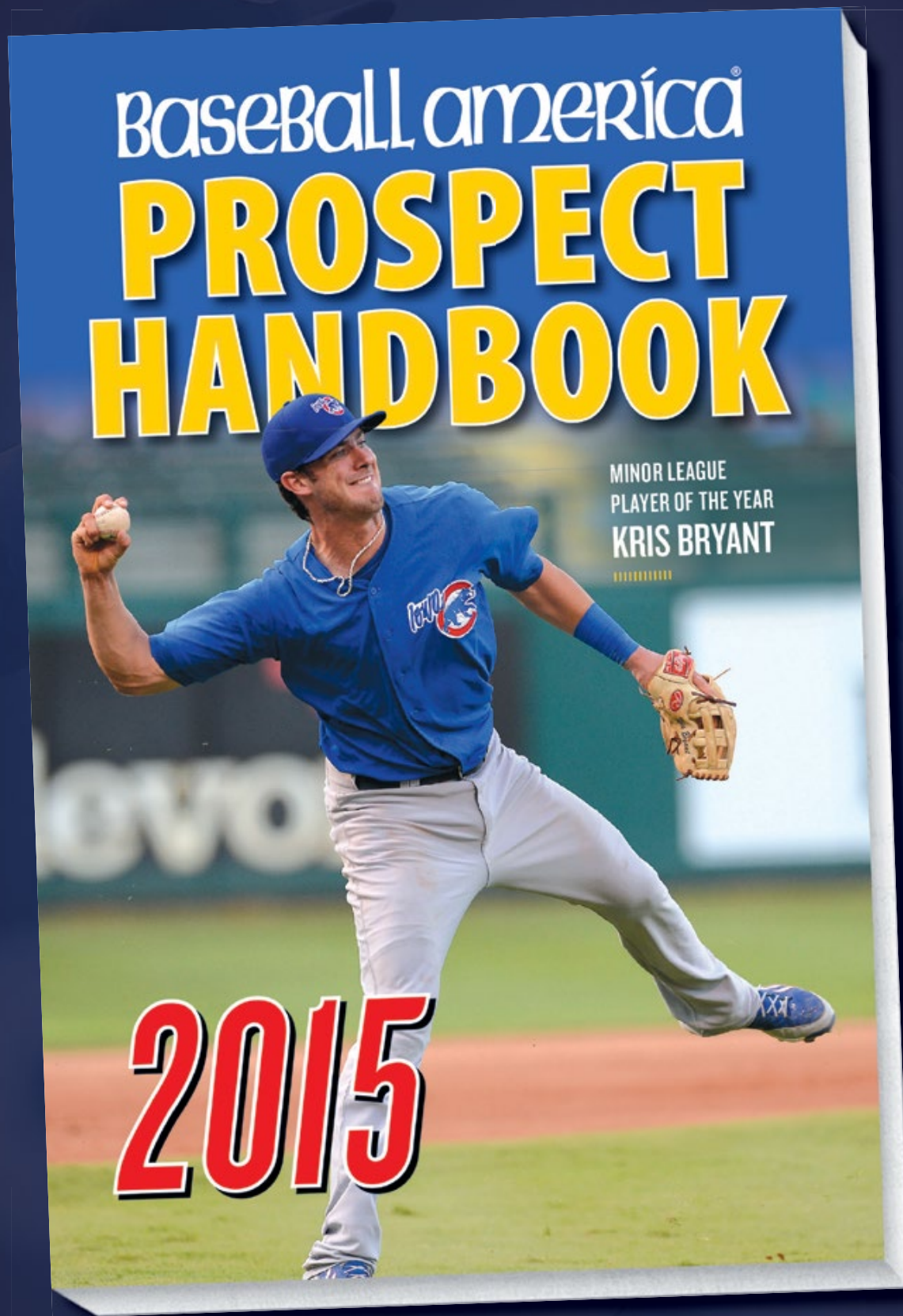
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MONDAY – FRIDAY 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM ET

Things bending Beckham's way now

TAMPA BAY | Rays

BY MARC TOPKIN



For statistics, organization reports, prospect lists and recent drafts, check out: baseballamerica.com/t/organization-reports/

PORT CHARLOTTE, FLA. Nearly seven years after the Rays made prep shortstop **Tim Beckham** the No. 1 pick in the 2008 draft—ahead of **Buster Posey**, among others—he has his first, and best, chance to make the big league roster.

With starting shortstop **Yunel Escobar** and second baseman **Ben Zobrist** both traded in the offseason, Beckham attends spring training with the opportunity to compete for the starting shortstop job or, failing that, a role as backup infielder.

Part of the decision will be based on whether free agent import **Asdrubal Cabrera** is best suited for second base or shortstop,

but Beckham is working hard to convince the Rays he belongs.

That process started when he came down from his home in December to start working out at Tropicana Field. Then he was among the first players to report to Port Charlotte.

"I felt like everyone here should know I'm down here early," said Beckham, 25. "I'm down here to work. I'm down here to win that spot. I want to be that guy."

"I want to be the player I know I'm capable of being, and I want to maximize that."

Beckham's path has been rocky, between his slow progress through the minors, a recreational-drug suspension that sidelined him for 50 games in 2012 and a lost 2014 season after he blew out his right knee in offseason workouts.

"He's definitely had ups and downs in his career," vice president of baseball operations **Chaim Bloom** said. "As much pressure as there has been on him since he was drafted, I

don't think anyone expects more of Tim than he does.

"As with any high school draft, there's a maturation process, but from Day One he's been one of our hardest workers . . . He's shown us the bat speed and athleticism to be an everyday big leaguer, and we're really looking forward to watching him this spring."

Beckham is eager to see that work translate into results.

"It hasn't been all fine and dandy, man, but I'm here," he said. "I'm here, and I'm ready to play."

COOL RAYS

■ Righthander **Grant Balfour** will be inducted into the Australian baseball hall of fame on Feb. 28. Though players usually have to be retired, officials moved Balfour's induction so that his father David, who is battling cancer, could attend.

■ Righthander **Ronald Belisario** and second baseman **Alexi Casilla** were among veterans signing late-spring minor league deals with camp invitations.



Tim Beckham

MINE JAMES

BALTIMORE | Orioles

BY ROCH KUBATKO

How Low Can You Go?

BALTIMORE **Mychal Givens** is becoming more than a curiosity as he enters year three of the transition from shortstop to pitcher.

The 24-year-old went a combined 1-2, 3.53 in 36 appearances last season, striking out 55 batters in 59 innings, between high Class A Frederick and Double-A Bowie.

The Orioles brought Givens to their January minicamp in Sarasota, Fla., and continued to tinker with his delivery while envisioning him as a potential late-inning reliever in Baltimore. He needs to improve his control after walking 6.0 batters per nine innings last year.

Big league manager **Buck Showalter** wants Givens to further lower an arm slot that alternates between sidearm and low three-quarters and produces a fastball that touches the mid-90s.

"I'm focusing on just trying to stay consistent and stay more balanced," Givens said, "and staying over my front, not pulling off the ball, and staying more consistent throwing strikes and with my delivery."

"Mostly, I really dictate where my arm is to where I can get in a good position to throw strikes."

The Orioles selected Givens in the second round of the 2009 draft out of high school in Tampa. He batted .247/.331/.311 in four seasons and never advanced past low Class A Delmarva, save for one game at Frederick in 2010.

Does Givens miss his old position and taking his swings at the plate?

"You always miss that everyday routine, but at the same time I'm a person who leaves things in the past," he said. "I worry about what's in the near future for me."

Givens is only a phone call away at Bowie.

"Everybody knows that if we're doing good and they need help, we'll find a way to get up there," Givens said.

BIRD SEED

■ The Orioles re-signed outfielder **Julio Borbon** to a minor league deal that did not include an invitation to spring training. Baltimore selected him in the minor league phase of the 2013 Rule 5 draft, and he hit .288/.342/.356 with five home runs and 34 stolen bases in 124 games at Triple-A Norfolk in 2014.

■ Third baseman **Austin Anderson**, a ninth-rounder last year from Mississippi, received a 50-game suspension without pay after testing positive for an amphetamine, a stimulant in violation of the minor league drug program.

BOSTON | Red Sox

BY ALEX SPEIER

Margot On The Go

BOSTON Since they signed center fielder **Manuel Margot** out of the Dominican Republic as a 16-year-old in 2011, the Red Sox have viewed him as perhaps their foremost five-tool talent.

He is more than willing to set his sights on being just such a player.

"I like **Adam Jones** because he's a five-tool guy," Margot said through a translator. "That's who I look up to."

Margot doesn't feature Jones' power, but in 2014 his across-the-board skills transformed from an impressive package of tools to in-game production that gave him a chance to be an everyday player.

He spent most of his age-19 season at low Class A Greenville, where a big second half propelled him to a .286/.355/.449 batting line with 10 homers, 39 steals and a fine ratio of walks (37) to strikeouts (49). He earned an August promotion to high Class A Salem.

"It was definitely unexpected (to finish the season in Salem). It was just the hard work in Greenville that paid off," said Margot, 20, who has earned the reputation of a cage rat. "I just wanted to finish the season strong. I'm really happy about it."

Margot shows the range and arm to be an above-average defender in center field. While his 5-foot-11, 175-pound frame doesn't project to add much additional muscle, his strong wrists generate plenty of now power.

In fact, Margot was one of just five minor leaguers to hit double-digit homers (12) and steal 40-plus bases (42) in 2014, and he was the only one to do so as a teenager. Meanwhile, his contact skills have helped him to hold his own thus far in his career against older opponents.

Margot should open 2015 back at Salem, but given the way he managed the transition between levels late last year, don't be surprised to see him at Double-A Portland before the end of the year.

SOX YARNS

■ The Red Sox did not invite 2013 third-round catcher **Jon Denney** to spring training this year. He remains on the restricted list following a March 2014 arrest for driving with a suspended license in Fort Myers, Fla.

■ The Red Sox brought back a former Top 10 Prospect, signing minor league free agent third baseman **Oscar Tejeda** after he spent the 2014 season in the Nationals system. Boston lost him on a waiver claim to the Pirates in June 2012, and he spent parts of two seasons in their system.

NEW YORK | Yankees

BY GEORGE KING

No Substitute For Experience

NEW YORK Right fielder **Aaron Judge** and righthander **Luis Severino** will have plenty of eyes on them in their initial exposure to big league spring training camp.

Judge's immense raw power and 6-foot-7, 230-pound frame can be intoxicating to watch. Severino is the system's No. 1 prospect and has an outside chance of reaching the majors this season.

The Yankees have more than exhibition-game evaluations in mind when they bring high-end prospects to camp for the first time.

"We want them exposed to the major league staff, and to be exposed to big league players," general manager **Brian Cashman** said. "(We want to show them) what a major league clubhouse is like, and how the right way to go about their business."

"We want them to see the players and the devotion to their craft they might not have seen in the lower levels of the minor leagues."

The 22-year-old Judge, a first-round pick from Fresno State in 2013, has seen action in one season thus far and hasn't advanced past high Class A Tampa. He played 131 games in 2014, which he began at low Class A Charleston, batting .308/.419/.486 with 17 homers, 78 RBIs and 89 walks.

Severino, who signed out of the Dominican Republic in 2011, pitched at Charleston, Tampa and Double-A Trenton last season. In 24 starts, the 6-foot, 195-pound righty went 6-5, 2.47 and fanned 127 and walked 27 in 113 innings.

"They have to finish off their development," Cashman said of Judge and Severino. "Being a prospect means you haven't made it."

YANKEE DOODLES

■ Judge and Severino are joined by other first-time prospects, including lefty reliever **Jacob Lindgren**, a second-round pick in 2014, and second baseman **Rob Refsnyder**, a fifth-rounder in 2012.

■ The Yankees also invited 2009 and 2010 first-rounders **Slade Heathcott**, an oft-injured outfielder, and **Cito Culver**, a smooth-fielding shortstop, to big league camp.



Aaron Judge

TORONTO | Blue Jays

BY SHI DAVIDI

In Good Hands

TORONTO **Mike Mordecai** is the latest coordinator of instruction for the Blue Jays, taking over the critical player-development role that's served as a stepping stone for his three immediate predecessors.

The highly regarded 47-year-old, promoted after five years as infield coordinator, replaces **Clayton McCullough**, who left in January for a promotion to field coordinator of the Dodgers.

McCullough took over from **Tim Leiper**, who was promoted to big league first-base coach in Toronto, and he replaced John Mallee, who is now the hitting coach for the Cubs. This succession underlines the type of coaching talent that has overseen Blue Jays farmhands.

"We've had some really good ones in that spot," said **Tony LaCava**, the assistant general manager and farm director, "but I don't think any are any better than Mordy."

Mordecai played 793 games over 12 years as a utility infielder for the Braves, Expos and Marlins, and he will work closely with field coordinator **Doug Davis** in ensuring the club's fundamentals are coached in a consistent fashion.

"We want it to be very fluid, that when they get (to Toronto) they're used to doing this," Mordecai said. "We have to make sure that the fundamentals of the cut-offs, relays, bunt defenses and baserunning (are taught in a way) that at the big league level, (players know) this is what you're expected to do."

Covering Mordecai's previous role is **Danny Solano**, who gets the title of roving infield coach. The Blue Jays also named **Aaron Matthews** hitting coach at Rookie-level Bluefield.

JAYS CHATTER

■ Righthander **Roberto Osuna** is one of six prospects not on the 40-man roster to receive an invitation to big league camp. The 20-year-old spent most of last year recovering from Tommy John surgery, but after seven late-season outings at high Class A Dunedin, plus six appearances in the Arizona Fall League, he's all systems go. LaCava describes Osuna as someone with a "chance in the near future to impact the team."

■ Righthander **Jeff Hoffman**, the ninth overall pick in last year's draft, is throwing off a mound again as he continues to make progress in his recovery from Tommy John surgery last May. The elbow injury caused the 24-year-old to slide down the draft board, and Toronto intends to be cautious while rebuilding him.

Jackson seeks fresh start with Braves

ATLANTA | Braves

BY BILL BALLEW



For statistics, organization reports, prospect lists and recent drafts, check out: baseballamerica.com/t/organization-reports/

ATLANTA Long-time Braves scouting director **Paul Snyder** noted during a scout-day evaluation of **Justin Jackson** that if his career didn't pan out at shortstop, then he would get a long look on the mound.

The infielder displayed that kind of arm strength on his throws, even as a senior at Roberson High in Asheville, N.C.

Snyder's forecast is about to unfold in the Braves organization. Jackson, a supplemental first-round pick of the Blue Jays in 2007, signed as a minor league free agent with Atlanta in mid-November.

"Signing with the Braves was the best fit for

me because of location and the opportunities they have there," said Jackson, 26. "It's one of the best pitching organizations in baseball.

"I feel it's a place where I can take my game to the next level by having the people around me who will get the most out of my ability."

Considered to be an above-average defender with a plus arm, Jackson struggled at the plate during his first six minor league seasons. After hitting .230/.320/.315 in 542 games that included some time in the outfield, he shifted to the mound in 2013.

In two seasons on the mound, the 6-foot-2, 190-pound righthanded reliever has reached Double-A (briefly), while logging a 4.02 ERA over 79 appearances and striking out 6.6 and walking 4.5 batters per nine innings.

The athletic Jackson repeats his delivery, but his lack of experience has been obvious with poor control and command of his pitches.

His fastball sat 93-95 mph last season and

touched 98, and he mixes it with an improving slider and changeup.

"I feel my pitching has been progressing great," Jackson said. "I've made goals each year and I've reached them. I'm continuing to get better, but I need to make quality pitches every single night.

"I'm just looking to get experience so I can continue to clean up my game and become the best pitcher I can be."

WIGWAM WISPS

■ Righthander **Shae Simmons** had Tommy John surgery in mid-February after experiencing elbow pain a week earlier. The hard-throwing reliever made his big league debut on May 31, though he missed the final two months of 2014 with shoulder issues.

■ Special assistant **Greg Walker** will spend time this season working with minor league hitters, the Braves announced just prior to spring training. This prompted **Ronnie Ortegón** to resign as minor league hitting coordinator after only one year in the position.



Justin Jackson

MIAMI | Marlins

BY JUAN RODRIGUEZ

One Step Forward

FORT LAUDERDALE Righthander **Matt Milroy** opened 2014 at low Class A Greensboro with a pair of five-out relief appearances. He gave up a combined seven runs on six hits, three walks and a hit batsman.

That was the low point of what was a brief, but fruitful two-and-a-half months in the South Atlantic League. Milroy over his remaining 60 innings logged a 1.95 ERA, yielding 38 hits and striking out 83.

"I think it was a combination of having a really good, experienced catcher in **Chad Wallach** and then a great coaching staff," said Milroy, 24. "I had a few good outings and really got comfortable, and just let that take its course."

That course took Milroy south to high Class A Jupiter in late June. He earned the promotion by going 6-3, 2.56 at Greensboro, while keeping the ball on the ground (one home run allowed) and striking out 12.4 batters per nine innings.

An 11th-round pick out of Illinois in 2012, Milroy found his SAL success difficult to duplicate in the Florida State League.

An ankle injury slowed his progress, and he soon found himself battling familiar control issues. Milroy walked more batters (38) than he struck out (37) in 50 innings at Jupiter.

"The caliber of hitter was definitely different," Milroy said. "They were a lot more patient and didn't swing at pitches the guys at Low-A would. I didn't put myself in the better situations most of the time."

Milroy complements a swing-and-miss slider with a fastball that touches the mid-90s. While in college he dropped his arm slot and began generating great sink, and he allowed just five homers in 113 innings in 2014. He also throws a get-me-over curve and continues to develop a changeup.

"It's mostly just figuring out how the ball comes out of my hand," Milroy said, "and really getting a consistent grip I feel comfortable with."

"I think I have now and I'm looking forward to trying it out in spring training."

FISH BITES

■ Righthander **Tyler Higgins**, who had Tommy John surgery last season, will not be ready for the start of 2015.

■ Ex-Marlins minor league **Kevin Randel**, the hitting coach at Double-A Jacksonville from 2012-14 and at Greensboro from 2010-11, will manage the Grasshoppers in 2015.

NEW YORK | Mets

BY ADAM RUBIN

Ynoa Has The Knack

PORT ST. LUCIE, FLA. Righthander **Gabriel Ynoa** issued just 25 walks in 148 innings last season between high Class A St. Lucie and Double-A Binghamton. Yet what really impressed St. Lucie pitching coach **Phil Regan** was the 21-year-old's composure on the mound.

"Nothing bothers him. He's not afraid," Regan said. "Plus, he's got some pretty good pitches. He throws hard enough, and he's got a good breaking ball and good offspeed pitches."

"But the thing I really like about him is he doesn't rattle when he's on the mound."

Ynoa, who signed out of the Dominican Republic in 2009, went a combined 11-4, 4.07 in 25 starts in the Florida State and Eastern leagues. He did surrender 169 hits, though, which seemingly is a product of being around the plate so often. He struck out 106 batters.

Ynoa's fastball sits at 92-94 mph. He also throws a plus changeup as well as a slider.

As for Ynoa's knack for strike-throwing, Regan said: "It's not a violent delivery. It's more of an easy-type delivery where it's pretty smooth."

"Really, he's had that. I didn't have to do a lot with him. It's just a nice, smooth motion. I think sometimes you're born with that."

Mets officials have compared Ynoa with fellow Dominican righthander **Rafael Montero**, who debuted in the majors last season. Regan accepts that comparison, for the most part.

"Montero maybe throws a little bit harder and maybe has a little bit better breaking ball, but they're close," Regan said.

"Both of them, nothing bothers them. They don't get too nervous. In that way, they're pretty much alike."

METAMORPHOSES

■ Righthander **Johnny Magliozzi**, a 17th-round pick from Florida in 2013, expects to return to the mound in July as he works back from Tommy John surgery.

■ **Luis Natera**, who served as assistant hitting coach for the big league team last season, will work as hitting coach at Binghamton in 2015.



Gabriel Ynoa

PHILADELPHIA | Phillies

BY JIM SALISBURY

A Fast-Track Guy

PHILADELPHIA Advance praise for first-round righthander **Aaron Nola** described him as one of the most polished talents in the 2014 draft, a pitcher who could move quickly toward the big leagues.

Selected seventh overall by the Phillies, Nola lived up to that billing during his first pro summer, impressing observers at high Class A Clearwater and Double-A Reading, where he finished with five starts.

Many thought the former Louisiana State ace might be invited to big league spring training in 2015, but after giving the matter much thought, Phillies officials decided against the idea.

"We just didn't feel like it was necessary," general manager **Ruben Amaro Jr.** said. "We need to take a look at some other guys. He's not one of those kids who we need to see mature or develop mentally. We think that he's got . . . other parts of the game that he needs to continue to work on."

"He'll get into minor league camp and get into the program there, and it will be good for him. When he's ready to come to the big leagues, he'll come to the big leagues."

The 21-year-old Nola has just 55 pro innings under his belt, and just 24 at the Double-A level, where he projects to headline a prospect-laden Reading staff in 2015. He went 4-3, 2.93 with 45 strikeouts and 10 walks between the two levels.

Fastball command is his strength, but he still needs to work on holding baserunners and making the fine-tune adjustments that come with experience.

It's not out of the question that Nola could be considered for big league time later in 2015.

"A lot of it depends on his performance and how he continues to develop," Amaro said, "but he's a fast-track guy, and there's a reason why. He's got pitchability that's beyond his years. He's got great poise—but he still needs work."

PHIL-UPS

■ While the Phillies did not invite shortstop **J.P. Crawford**, the system's No. 1 prospect, to big league camp, they expect him to reach Reading in 2015.

■ The Phillies signed lefty **Anthony Vasquez** to a minor league deal in early February. He reached the majors for 29 innings with the Mariners in 2011 and required emergency brain surgery in 2012.

WASHINGTON | Nationals

BY LACY LUSK

Continuity Is Key

WASHINGTON After another successful year on the farm, the Nationals decided not to make any changes to their managerial lineup.

Players and coaches require no meet-and-greet when minor league camp opens, not with **Billy Gardner Jr.** managing Triple-A Syracuse, **Brian Daubach** at Double-A Harrisburg, **Tripp Keister** at high Class A Potomac and **Patrick Anderson** at low Class A Hagerstown.

Combined with the short-season Auburn and Rookie-level Gulf Coast League affiliates, Washington's six domestic clubs had a .514 winning percentage in 2014, which ranked 10th in baseball.

Farm director **Mark Scialabba** said the continuity allows the vice presidents of player development (**Doug Harris**) and player personnel (**Bob Boone**) and general manager **Mike Rizzo** to count on a high standard of play.

"Having consistency in the organization really helps our communication with our philosophies, the way we want our players to play the National way," Scialabba said. "It's from the top on down. As far as the field staff goes, it's something that's nice to have. You already have a foundation built."

Auburn's **Gary Cathcart**, the GCL's **Michael Barrett** and the Dominican Summer League's **Sandy Martinez** also return to manage their teams.

Syracuse made the International League playoffs as the No. 1 seed in 2014. Hagerstown reached the South Atlantic League finals and had a system-best .621 winning percentage.

Anderson has praised the makeup of the players he has received. That's part of why Keister expects to have a contender again at Potomac after winning the Carolina League championship in 2014.

"Heck, probably no one on the team knows (about the league title) except the coaching staff and the fans," Keister said. "We have to keep working and approach each day as we need to get kids to move up."

CAPITAL GAINS

■ **Pedro Severino** and **Spencer Kieboom**, the catchers at Potomac and Hagerstown last season, each received non-roster invitations to big league spring training.

■ After signing **Max Scherzer** and forfeiting their first-round pick in 2015, the Nationals will not draft until No. 58 overall, which is a compensation choice for not signing 2014 second-round lefty **Andrew Suarez** from Miami.

Michalczewski embraces early lessons

CHICAGO | **White Sox**
BY SCOT GREGOR



For statistics, organization reports, prospect lists and recent drafts, check out: baseballamerica.com/t/organization-reports/

CHICAGO The results were only too predictable for third baseman **Trey Michalczewski** in 2014, as he spent his first full season in the South Atlantic and Carolina leagues.

The 19-year-old performed well at low Class A Kannapolis, hitting .273/.348/.433 with 10 home runs and 70 RBIs in 116 games.

"Being at Kannapolis, that was the best I've felt in a long time," Michalczewski said. "A lot of it was because of the coaches we had there. They were great."

"(Manager) **Pete Rose Jr.** helped me out a lot, mentally, just relaxing. He always told me,

'Be 19 years old. You don't have to be anything else.' That really kind of helped me put things in perspective, and it helped me realize that I don't have to go out there and try to do more and worry about things. Just go out and have fun and play the game hard."

When Michalczewski moved up to high Class A Winston-Salem late in the season, he wasn't the same player. In 19 games with the Dash, the 6-foot-3, 210-pound switch-hitter batted .194 and struck out 21 times in 72 at-bats.

"When I got to Winston-Salem I was pretty worn out," said Michalczewski, a seventh-round pick in 2013 out of Jenks (Okla.) High. "I was just trying to do the best I could to stay as loose as I could and not focus on how crappy I felt."

With a full season of experience under his belt, Michalczewski has a much better idea what to expect this year. He probably will open the season with Winston-Salem

and could earn a promotion to Double-A Birmingham.

Like most young hitters, reducing his strikeout rate is an obvious goal. He struck out 140 times in 432 at-bats with Kannapolis.

"Overall, I felt like I had a pretty good year," Michalczewski said. "I struck out quite a bit, but being young, you're not used to seeing that type of pitching. It was a little different and I kind of got a little jumpy at times and would swing at bad pitches, but I think that comes with being young. I feel like the more I play the more I'll start to be patient and keep on learning."

CHI-LITES

■ The White Sox expect speedy outfielder **Tony Campana** to miss the entire 2015 season after tearing his anterior cruciate ligament.

■ Chicago signed reliever **Matt Albers** to a minor league deal. Shoulder issues limited the righthander to eight games with the Astros last year.



Trey Michalczewski

TOM PRIDDY

CLEVELAND | **Indians**
BY JIM INGRAHAM

Large Presence

CLEVELAND At 6-foot-4, 235 pounds, outfielder **Jordan Smith** is the kind of player that tends to get people's attention.

"He's got that physical presence," Indians farm director **Carter Hawkins** said. "When he walks into a room, he's the type of guy you could see in a major league clubhouse."

That's exactly where Smith found himself at the start of spring training—in a major league clubhouse. The Indians invited him to big league camp as a non-roster player.

"It's very exciting, a blessing. I'm looking forward to it," said Smith, 24.

A righthanded-hitting outfielder selected by Cleveland in the ninth round of the 2011 draft out of St. Cloud State (Minn.). In two seasons at St. Cloud, he hit .420 with 22 home runs and 135 RBIs.

Smith spent the 2014 season at Double-A Akron, hitting .248/.300/.341 with two home runs and 50 RBIs in 126 games. He improved as the season progressed, hitting .282 in the second half, then continued to make headway in the Arizona Fall League.

"He's gotten better every year," Hawkins said. "He started out as a contact, high-average hitter, but his power is starting to show. He's an outstanding defender (in right field). His reads and his routes are excellent."

Smith can play all three outfield positions. "I played mostly left field in the Fall League," he said. "I'm most comfortable in right field, but I can play all three."

"That's still to be determined," said Hawkins of Smith's best spot in the outfield. "We do know he can play anywhere."

SMOKE SIGNALS

■ Three former Indians—**Travis Hafner**, **John McDonald** and **Charles Nagy**—joined the organization as special assistants to player development and scouting.

■ Shortstop **Francisco Lindor** and outfielder **Tyler Naquin** were among seven minor leaguers invited to the major league camp as non-roster players. The others are Smith, catcher **Jake Lowery**, outfielder **James Ramsey**, infielder **Ryan Rohlinger** and righthander **Will Roberts**.



Jordan Smith

TOMASO DE ROSA

DETROIT | **Tigers**
BY CHRIS IOTT

Mercedes Seeking Movement

DETROIT At 6-foot-3 and 250 pounds, righthander **Melvin Mercedes** does not normally get lost in the crowd. But Tigers fans will be hard-pressed to find him during spring training this year.

Mercedes struggled during the 2014 season, his first at Triple-A Toledo, and is no longer on the team's 40-man roster. He also is not among the 17 non-roster players the Tigers invited to spring training.

Instead, Mercedes will spend this spring in minor league camp.

The 2014 season proved to be bittersweet for Mercedes, whom the Tigers signed out of the Dominican Republic in 2008. He struck out two and threw two perfect innings on Aug. 15 during his major league debut—but he did not perform while at Toledo.

Assistant general manager **Al Avila** said Mercedes has had some trouble getting consistent movement on his fastball.

"He has above-average velocity—92-97 (mph)—with occasional run and sink," Avila said. "The 'occasional' part has been one of the problems. He needs to stay on top more in his delivery to get that consistency in the sinking action."

The 24-year-old Mercedes logged a 4.92 ERA in 46 relief appearances at Toledo last season, striking out 31 in 60 innings while allowing too many baserunners (1.41 WHIP).

Mercedes has done a better job of finding the strike zone consistently. He has walked an average of 4.0 batters per nine innings in seven seasons in the minors, but he allowed just 2.4 per nine at Toledo in 2014.

Mercedes simply didn't miss enough bats last year, allowing 69 hits in 60 innings. Consistent movement on his fastball would help, as would development of his secondary pitches.

TIGER TALES

■ The Tigers signed righthander **Thad Weber** to a minor league deal. A 16th-round pick in 2008, Weber made his major league debut for the Tigers during the 2012 season. He pitched in Korea in 2014.

■ The Tigers traded away several young infield prospects in the past year, including **Willy Adames**, **Domingo Leyba** and **Eugenio Suarez**, but that doesn't necessarily open the door to playing time for projected Triple-A shortstop **Dixon Machado** because Detroit also has two backup infielders—**Andrew Romine** and **Hernan Perez**—who are out of options.

KANSAS CITY | **Royals**
BY ALAN ESKEW

Second In Class

KANSAS CITY The Royals selected **Scott Blewett** in the second round of last year's draft, taking the 6-foot-6 righthander from Baker High in Baldwinsville, N.Y. He was not the highest-drafted athlete out of the cozy Syracuse suburb in 2014, however.

Alex Tuch went 18th overall to the Minnesota Wild in the NHL draft a couple of weeks after the Royals chose Blewett.

"He's actually one of my good friends," Blewett said. "I grew up with him from the age of 5 on. We've always been pretty close. He lived just down the street from me."

Blewett said he played hockey for eight years, stopping when he was 13. He also played basketball but quit after his sophomore season to concentrate on baseball.

It paid off when the Royals signed him for \$1.8 million, above the slotted \$1,003,200 for the 56th overall pick. Blewett, who eschewed a St. John's scholarship to turn pro, was projected to go higher until a sore shoulder shut him down for most of May and left scouts in a quandary with some backing off.

"I had a weak scapula," Blewett said. "I felt some symptoms from it. I rehabbed it and strengthened it. I'm all set now. It was frustrating for sure, taking three weeks out of my senior high school season. It definitely caused a few problems. Helping my team out, for one, and everybody wondering what was going on."

"Other than that I got through it. I handled it pretty well. (Scouts) were just wondering what was going on. I was up front and honest. I didn't feel like myself, so I wasn't going to go out and put myself in harm's way."

Blewett throws both a two-seam and four-seam fastball that ranges from 91-94 mph and touches 96, along with a 12-to-6 curveball and an in-progress changeup.

"He's a big power arm, a **Chris Carpenter**, **Roy Halladay**-type body and projection," scouting director **Lonnie Goldberg** said.

ROYALTIES

■ The Royals will receive the 33rd pick overall in June's draft as compensation for the Padres signing **James Shields**. The Royals also have the 22nd pick in the first round.

■ The Royals signed outfielder/first baseman **Mike Bianucci**, a 2008 eighth-round pick of the Rangers out of Auburn. He began last season in the Mexican League and finished it in the Double-A Texas League, hitting 22 home runs in 361 at-bats along the way.

MINNESOTA | **Twins**
BY PHIL MILLER

Wipeout Pitch

MINNEAPOLIS One pitch isn't enough, not even at the big league level. Even **Mariano Rivera** had a repertoire of complementary pitches to his famous cutter.

The Twins are confident that righthanded reliever **Jake Reed** understands that his slippery-sideways fastball alone isn't going to make him a successful big leaguer.

Still, "when you've got a pitch like that one, you can understand why he's reluctant to throw anything else," vice president for player personnel **Mike Radcliff** said.

Not as reluctant as righthanders are to face it, though. Reed, Oregon's converted closer who was drafted in the fifth round in 2014, punished same-side batters in his first season as a pro, holding them to four singles and a double in 61 plate appearances. He also limited lefthanders to a .130 average.

It all added up to one earned run—and none after June 30—in 31 innings at Rookie-level Elizabethton and low Class A Cedar Rapids, a performance he followed up with one run in 13 innings against more advanced competition in the Arizona Fall League.

"It's not unusual for college guys to start off well in the low minors," Radcliff said. "We thought (the AFL) would really challenge him, but it looked like he barely noticed."

That's because of that fastball, which sits in the mid-90s and can reach 97 mph. Impressive enough, but Reed's heater, thrown from a three-quarters arm slot, has a cutting movement toward the hands of righthanders.

"It busts a lot of bats," Radcliff said.

Combined with a hard slider that slices in the opposite direction, Reed's fastball has positioned the 22-year-old to move quickly. As long as he brings a breaking ball or change-up along with it, Radcliff said.

"Once he's able to mix in something off-speed to keep hitters off-balance," Radcliff said, "who knows how far that pitch will take him?"

TWIN KILLINGS

■ Lefthander **Luke Westphal**, a 25-year-old reliever who spent the past two seasons pitching in the independent Frontier League, signed a minor league contract.

■ The Twins held a ribbon-cutting ceremony at their renovated spring training and minor league complex in Fort Myers, Fla. In addition to remodeling Hammond Stadium, the \$48.5 million project added a player development academy and residential area, and a new Gulf Coast League playing field.

Under the radar, but in Cubs' plans

CHICAGO | Cubs

BY GORDON WITTENMYER



For statistics, organization reports, prospect lists and recent drafts, check out: baseballamerica.com/t/organization-reports/

CHICAGO By now everybody knows how loaded the Cubs farm system is, with six players landing on the Top 100 Prospects list—including four in the top 20 and two of the top three.

But the ultimate success of **Theo Epstein's** fourth-year rebuilding process—if history (and/or the St. Louis Cardinals' track record) means anything—will be in what the organization gets out of the less-heralded guys.

Three of those guys to watch this year, based on early signs, include:

■ Third baseman **Jeimer Candelario**, 21. Despite a down year offensively, the Cubs are still high on the strong-armed, switch-

hitting infielder. "He has all the tools to be an impact third baseman, with a great swing from both sides of the plate," farm director **Jaron Madison** said. "I expect a pretty good year out of him."

■ Outfielder **Bijan Rademacher**, 23. The 2012 13th-rounder's .811 OPS last season at high Class A Daytona was better than more touted outfield prospects **Albert Almora** and **Billy McKinney** as well as powerful first baseman **Dan Vogelbach**—and then he raked for 11 games in the Arizona Fall League. "He quietly put together a very good year," player development executive **Jason McLeod** said. "I think he's a guy that's going to have to keep proving himself, but he's shown to this point he's a professional hitter and can play all over the outfield. I think we might look up in a couple years and see him playing in the major leagues for us."

■ Catcher **Victor Caratini**, 21. The converted infielder who came over from the

Braves for lefthander **James Russell** last summer immediately bolstered a weak position for the Cubs and made a strong first impression for low Class A Kane County. "He can hit from both sides of the plate, has some power and a big strong body," Madison said of the 6-foot, 200-pounder. "He's learning how to catch, and that's going to be the biggest thing for him. But I think he's due for a breakout year."

CUBBYHOLE

■ The Cubs aren't in a rush to start **Kris Bryant's** service clock, but the absence of big league, third base candidates might work in his favor. "We see him really, really close to the big leagues," Epstein said of baseball's top prospect. "We love everything about him . . . we'll see where we are at the end of spring training."

■ Righthander **Gonzalez Germen**, who was claimed off waivers from the Rangers in January and waived in February to make room for another pitcher, cleared waivers and was outrighted to Triple-A Iowa.



Jeimer Candelario

RODGER WOOD

CINCINNATI | Reds

BY C. TRENT ROSECRANS

Staying The Course

CINCINNATI **Ryan LaMarre** is a semester short of a degree in kinesiology from Michigan, but he feels like his career the last couple of years has been a graduate course.

The 26-year-old outfielder's case study began in 2012, when he had what he thought was a heel bruise. That was later diagnosed as plantar fasciitis in his left foot. That, he said, flattened out his arches, and after training, it seemed to lead to what he thought were shin splints.

That changed the way he ran, and he ended up with two hernias. Then, last season, when he finally got those treated, an MRI exam showed that he'd suffered a stress fracture in his left tibia, requiring surgery to put in a nine-inch steel rod in October. He went 10-for-50 in just 50 at-bats for Triple-A Louisville last season.

"You learn a lot about the body, that's for sure—more than I care to know," LaMarre said. "I feel like I should get some independent study credit for that—I need to contact someone at Michigan about that. Maybe I can write a thesis or something."

The Reds took LaMarre off the 40-man roster when they needed a spot, designating him for assignment to make room for Cuban righthander **Raisel Iglesias** in August. But when the time came to come back, LaMarre didn't want to go anywhere else, re-signing with the team that selected him in the second round of the 2010 draft.

"I talked to (general manager) **Walt Jocketty** when I got designated, and I felt like for him to take time out of his day to talk to me, it said a lot," LaMarre said. "The people in this organization have seen me at my best, they drafted me, they want me to be my best. It wasn't much of a tough decision to come back here."

LaMarre hasn't been cleared to play again, but he's getting close and hopes to be ready in April.

RED HOT

■ Reds manager **Bryan Price** said even if Iglesias wins a spot in the team's bullpen out of spring training, they still want him to start in the future.

■ The Reds claimed infielder/outfielder **Chris Dominguez** from the Giants, bringing him to big league camp. The 28-year-old righthanded hitter, drafted in the third round in 2009 out of Louisville, batted .274/.304/.460 for Triple-A Fresno.

MILWAUKEE | Brewers

BY TOM HAUDRICOURT

Brewers Cut AWOL Delmonico

MILWAUKEE Because third base has been a position of need in their organization, the Brewers were excited to get **Nick Delmonico** in a trade with the Orioles in July 2013 for righthanded reliever **Francisco Rodriguez**.

Delmonico, a sixth-round draft pick by the Orioles in 2012 out of Farragut (Tenn.) High, was the fourth-round prospect in their system heading into 2013 and immediately was placed high on the Brewers' list. But it took only a year and half for the Brewers to decide to release the 22-year-old Delmonico.

A red flag went up last spring when Delmonico missed minor league camp for what the Brewers only would say were "personal reasons." He later reported to extended spring training and was assigned in-season to high Class A Brevard County, where he had finished the 2013 season.

Delmonico .262/.300/.404 in 37 games for the Manatees before he was suspended for 50 games on July 28 for testing positive for an amphetamine. He hadn't played for three weeks for unspecified reasons at the time of his suspension.

That suspension carried over to the 2015 season but was not why the Brewers released Delmonico.

"We couldn't contact him," farm director Reid Nichols said. "With all the (high) maintenance, we didn't feel like he was a major league prospect. The work wasn't worth it. It was a lot going on there."

So, an organization that needs all the third-base prospects it can find decided to cut ties with the once-promising Delmonico in early February. A week later, he signed a minor league deal with the White Sox.



Nick Delmonico

BILL MITCHELL

MICROBREWS

■ Righthander **David Herndon**, whose 2014 season with the Yankees' Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre affiliate was cut short by a shoulder issue, signed a minor league deal.

■ Righthander **Josh Roenicke**, the nephew of Brewers manager Ron Roenicke, signed a minor league deal after pitching for the Rockies' and Nationals' Triple-A affiliates.

PITTSBURGH | Pirates

BY JOHN PEROTTO

Relating Well

PITTSBURGH When **Neal Huntington** went about hiring special assistants in the offseason, the general manager looked for people who could relate to managers, coaches and players throughout the organization.

That is why he hired three men well-regarded in baseball circles—**Grady Little**, **Kevin Young** and **Jamey Carroll**.

Little, 64, returns to the major leagues for the first time since resigning as the Dodgers manager following the 2007 season. He spent two years each as manager with the Dodgers and Red Sox (2002-03), compiling a 358-290 record in the four years and never recording a losing season. He was fired by the Red Sox after the team lost a seven-game ALCS to the Yankees.

"Grady brings years of in-the-dugout experience," Huntington said. "He'll be a great mentor for our minor league coaches and managers. And he'll be a great advisor for me."

Little spent the past two years as head coach at Hickory Grove Christian High in Charlotte.

Young had two stints as a corner infielder with the Pirates, totalling 11 seasons, from 1992-95 and 1997-2003, spending one year with the Royals in between.

"He brings a recent player perspective to the table," Huntington said. "We'll be able to engage him with some of our players, whether it's first base-specific or some of our hitters."

Carroll retired following the 2013 season after spending 12 years in the major leagues as an infielder with six teams. He will do a little bit of everything in his first year on the job.

"We're going to take this year to kind of hit all aspects of the organization and see where that may lead to next," Carroll said. "There's a lot of familiar faces for me in this organization, and it seemed like a fun, good fit."

PITTBURGERS

■ The Pirates are hoping a change of scenery might revive infielder **Edward Salcedo's** career after acquiring the infielder from the Braves in a trade for righthander **Bryton Trepagnier**. Salcedo, 23, was signed to a \$1.5 million bonus in 2010 out of the Dominican Republic, but has hit .235/.303/.381 in 2,097 at-bats over five minor league seasons.

■ The same change-of-scenery thought was behind the purchase of righthander **Arquimedes Caminero** from the Marlins. Caminero, 27, has yet to gain a foothold in the majors despite a fastball that tops out at 101 mph.

ST. LOUIS | Cardinals

BY DERRICK GOOLD

Tall Order For Ohlman

JUPITER, FLA. If he hasn't yet folded his 6-foot-5 frame into the uniform he wears to work every day, **Michael Ohlman** and his jangling limbs often get mistaken walking through clubhouse for a pitcher.

And then he grabs a mitt. "Oh, you're tall for a catcher," he said, recreating the moments. "I get that all the time."

Ohlman 24, arrived at spring training more than five inches taller than the next closest catcher in camp. The only catcher around the Cardinals who could understand the heights at which he played the position was the team's major league manager, 6-foot-3 and former Gold Glove-winner **Mike Matheny**.

It's no wonder then that early in spring training, Ohlman gravitated to the manager and welcomed an invitation to get some one-on-one work with him. He had the same view of the position.

"There aren't too many catchers with as long legs, and there are different mechanics for a guy who is 6-3 or 6-5 compared to a guy who is 5-10," Matheny said. "We're giving him some different options, ways to get his body out of the way."

Ohlman has taken ground balls at first base and fly balls in the outfield, but his passion is behind the plate. The Cardinals acquired Ohlman in exchange for cash from the Orioles, and they installed him immediately as catching depth on the roster.

For the Orioles organization, Ohlman had some assertive years at the plate, batting .311/.416/.543 overall at two levels in 2013. He slipped to .236/.310/.318 at Double-A in 2014.

Behind the plate, Ohlman continued to improve, borrowing techniques from **Joe Mauer** and the Orioles' **Matt Wieters**. Ohlman said he also looked at how Matheny played the position, scrunching his 6-3 frame into a tight target and then uncoiling quickly to release a throw. If he reaches the majors, Ohlman would be the tallest catcher the Cardinals have had in a century.

REDBIRD CHIRPS

■ Righthander **Alex Reyes** had an unexpected catcher when he came early to the team's complex: Matheny, who wanted to see what the young righthander had.

■ **Xavier Scruggs**, who has hit 20 homers in four consecutive seasons, played outfield during winter ball and has taken reps there during spring to prove he can be more versatile.

Thompson goes home with Rangers

TEXAS | **Rangers**
BY JEFF WILSON



For statistics, organization reports, prospect lists and recent drafts, check out: baseballamerica.com/t/organization-reports/

ARLINGTON The scenario that is playing out on the Rangers' roster with **Yovani Gallardo**, raised some 20 miles west of Globe Life Park, is playing out on the minor league side with **Jake Thompson**.

Thompson is back home in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in the organization he grew up watching after the Tigers traded him, along with fellow righthander and native Texan **Corey Knebel**, for reliever **Joakim Soria**.

Thompson, the Tigers' second-round pick in 2012, spent the offseason making the 45-minute commute from his home in Rockwall for workouts with many veterans.

The offseason was all about learning for the 21-year-old Thompson, who saw from **Derek Holland** the kind of work ethic it takes to be in a big league rotation.

"What doesn't get seen is how hard (Holland) works," Thompson said during the Rangers' annual pitching minicamp in January. "He really, really goes out of his way to help set an example for the young guys."

As the spring cliché goes, Thompson is in the best shape of his life. He spent the off-season getting stronger so that he can better withstand the rigors of a full season.

He worked on his mechanics as much as he did a repertoire that includes a two-seamer, a four-seamer, a plus slider and a changeup. Words from pitching coach **Mike Maddux** during the camp sunk in quickly.

"We were talking about how the change-up is the most neglected pitch in baseball but probably the best pitch in baseball," Thompson said. "I'm trying to refine that so

I can utilize it."

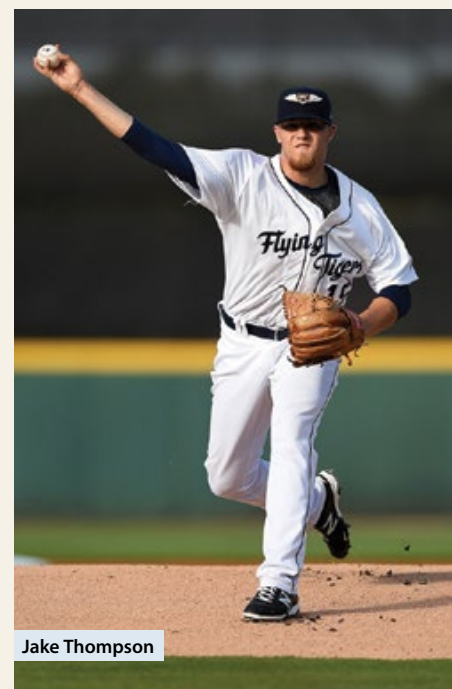
He's likely to open the season back at Double-A Frisco, which is about an hour's drive from his hometown of Heath.

"After the shock (of the trade) wore off, it was cool to come back home and play for your hometown team," Thompson said. "It's fun to come back and play in front of the people you grew up with."

RANGER ROUNDUP

■ The Rangers finalized their minor league coaching staffs heading into spring training, most notably with the addition of **Francisco Matos** as hitting coach at low Class A Hickory. Matos spent the past eight years in the Angels organization, including the last two years at Triple A Salt Lake.

■ Righthander **Anthony Ranaudo**, acquired in January from Boston and a contender for the fifth spot in the big league rotation, understands that he might open at Triple A Round Rock after finishing 2014 in the majors. "My job is to try and go out there and compete and ultimately help the team win whatever level that's at," he said.



Jake Thompson

MIKE JAMES

HOUSTON | **Astros**
BY JOSE DE JESUS ORTIZ

Backstop Backlog

HOUSTON During a team meeting early in big league spring training, Astros manager **A.J. Hinch** highlighted catcher **Roberto Pena's** 2014 minor league Gold Glove Award while introducing him to the pitchers and catchers.

Pena is part of an impressive crop of catching depth in the Astros farm system—joining **Max Stassi**, **Tyler Heineman** and **Luis Flores**, who was picked in the Triple-A portion of the Rule 5 draft last June.

"Yeah, definitely it's awesome," Heineman said. "It's challenging but it's also awesome to be with other catchers of that caliber. It's very nice to be with a great group of catchers, including the major league guys like Castro and Conger and even Evan Gattis. They're a little more experienced. They teach us and I think we're pretty good of soaking it all end and do as best as we can to get into their shoes."

At this point Stassi, who has had cameos in the majors late in the last two seasons, appears like the most ready for the majors if all-star **Jason Castro** or backup **Hank Conger** are injured.

"They're all at different stages of their career," Hinch said. "You have Stassi, who's gotten a taste of the big leagues and interaction with the older players and had some success last September. He sees the light at the end of the tunnel, as far as getting to the big leagues."

Heineman isn't far behind, though.

"I think Heineman is in the middle part of his minor-league career on his way up he soaks up a lot of different information," Hinch said. "I think he's a guy that I've learned if we can simplify the game for him he absorbs so much information and wants so much information we have to find a way to simplify it for him."

SPACE SHOTS

■ RHP **Mark Appel**, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2013 draft, is already drawing raves from the team's catchers with his bullpen sessions. "He always had the arm, his stuff was good," **Tyler Heineman** said of Appel. "His were missing closer to where they're (supposed to be) going. He's been able to throw the four-seamer, two-seamer down in the zone."

■ The Astros weren't in the market for **Yoan Moncada**. "When it's a combination of having to not only exceed your pool but pay 100 percent tax on top of that and lose picks, lose ability to sign players in the future, that's a pretty heavy penalty for one player," Astros general manager **Jeff Luhnow** said.

LOS ANGELES | **Angels**
BY MIKE DIGIOVANNA

Catching Eyes

ANAHEIM When the Angels traded catcher **Hank Conger** to Houston for pitcher **Nick Tropeano** and catcher **Carlos Perez** last November, Perez seemed like a throw-in, a strong-armed defender who provided depth.

But Perez, 24, emerged as a legitimate prospect, his stock boosted by a strong Venezuelan League showing.

"We've probably received more calls and hits on Carlos Perez than any player we have, because he's a young catcher who has made a lot of progress with the bat," general manager **Jerry Dipoto** said in December.

Perez, who played seven minor league seasons for Toronto and Houston, batted .329/.365/.500 for Caracas, with four homers, 11 doubles and 24 RBIs. He had 19 strikeouts and 10 walks in 146 at-bats.

The Venezuelan native has thrown out 226 of 637 basestealers in the minor leagues, a 35 percent success rate that compares favorably to the major league average of 27 percent. He appears well-armed to compete with **Drew Butera** and **Jett Bandy** for the backup catcher job behind **Chris Iannetta** this spring.

"I think he has a good opportunity to make the team," farm director **Bobby Scales** said. "He played tremendous ball in Venezuela. Any time you have success on the field, it's going to set you up for more success. Hopefully he uses that to springboard into 2015."

The 6-foot-, 210-pound Perez won't hit many homers, but he has a line-drive stroke, gap power and an ability to make contact. In addition to his strong arm, Perez moves well behind the plate and has displayed sound footwork and a quick release.

ANGEL FOOD

■ Lefthander **Jose Alvarez**, acquired from the Tigers for infielder **Andrew Romine** last spring, rebounded from an injury-plagued 2014 by going 6-1, 1.91 in the Venezuelan League, striking out 40 and walking 17 in 57 innings.

■ The Angels signed **Jeff Malm**, a 6-foot-3, 225-pound first baseman who was a fifth-round pick of the Rays in 2009, with plans to convert the 24-year-old lefthander into a pitcher.



Carlos Perez

MIKE JAMES

OAKLAND | **Athletics**
BY CASEY TEFERTILLER

A Cutter Above

OAKLAND When you go to Florida, you expect to find a few alligators and some strong Cuban coffee. **Kendall Graveman** found something that has served him much, much better.

The 24-year-old righthander "found" a cutter last year. He was not really looking for it, it just started hopping out of his hand, and he decided to ride with it. Ride he did, from low Class A to the majors in one season.

Even before he found the cutter, Graveman got off to a good start last year with the Blue Jays. In his first four games at low Class A Lansing, he went a 2-0, 0.34. That earned a promotion to high Class A Dunedin and started the life-changing chain of events.

"One day I was pitching in a game in the Florida State League, and I just stumbled on it while I was trying to throw a four-seam fastball," said Graveman, who came to Oakland as part of the Josh Donaldson deal last November. "I was trying to throw something hard to lefties. I made a couple of very small mechanical changes that helped me."

"It just started cutting, and I said, 'Hey, why don't we work on that.' My catcher and my pitching coach agreed. Once I figured it out, I tried to locate it."

Along with the cutter, he throws a hard two-seam sinker at 92-93 mph, a change and a slider. He has given up the four-seam fastball to focus on the cutter.

"He has great makeup and knows how to pitch," A's pitching coach **Curt Young** said. "He's moved quickly, so it's hard to imagine anything stopping him at this point."

The season, which ended in Toronto, was a whirlwind for a pitcher who was not ranked among the Blue Jays' Top 30 prospects at the start of the season.

"When I got home (after the season), I thought, 'if you told me I was going to be pitching in the big leagues this year, I would have laughed at you,'" Graveman said.

A'S ACORNS

■ Graveman is part of general manager **Billy Beane's** master plan for 2015, which is to stockpile pitching depth so the A's should have a constant assault of arms ready through the season in the event of injury and breakdowns.

■ Righthander **Blake McMullen** and catcher **Kyle Wheeler** retired shortly before spring training. McMullen was a 29th-round pick in 2013 out of the Science and Arts of Oklahoma, while Wheeler was a 26th-round pick in 2013 out of Belhaven (Miss.).

SEATTLE | **Mariners**
BY RYAN DIVISH

Free Delivery

SEATTLE **Danny Hultzen** is just normal pitcher this spring. A year removed from left-shoulder surgery to repair damage to the labrum, rotator cuff and anterior capsule, the 2011 No. 2 pick overall pick out of Virginia is back on the mound, pitching without limitations.

"It feels completely normal," he said. "I feel like I'm back. I have no idea what a game will be like. I haven't been in a full-game situation in a long time. But as far as how my arm feels and letting it go without thinking about it, I'm definitely back to before."

His bullpen catcher for the first bullpen session of the spring—**John Hicks**—saw the same thing. Hicks was Hultzen's primary catcher at Virginia.

"He looked pretty much like the old guy," said Hicks, a fourth-round pick in 2011. "I caught him a lot in college and a little bit here in years past. His velocity was back. It was coming out really good. Obviously, there was no radar gun to tell you exactly, but it looked like his good velocity."

Hultzen showed a good changeup, while still trying to find the feel of his curveball and a slider he just started throwing again.

During the year-long recovery from the surgery, Hultzen worked on cleaning up his delivery, trying to get his plant foot landing straighter to home plate. In previous years, Hultzen had thrown across his body, but it became more pronounced in 2013 before he got hurt.

It's a habit he thinks came from trying to take pressure off his ailing shoulder. This year, he draws a pair of lines in the dirt on the mound to make sure his foot is landing in the proper angle and place.

"I looked at film from college with **Gary Wheelock**, who is the rehab coordinator here," Hultzen said. "I was stepping a lot straighter then, and I'm trying to get back to that point. I'm not doing the whole crossfire thing anymore."

MARINADE

■ Catcher **Steve Baron**, the 33rd overall pick in 2009, was limited early this spring after slicing his left thumb with a knife while trying to separate frozen hamburger patties a week before reporting. The cut required five stitches.

■ **Marcus Littlewood**, the Mariners' second-round pick in 2010, got a late invite to big league camp. Littlewood, 22, was converted from shortstop to catcher and hit .250/.341/.394 in 77 games with low Class A Clinton last season.

Lopez's majors timetable: 'muy pronto'

ARIZONA | Diamondbacks

BY JACK MAGRUDER



For statistics, organization reports, prospect lists and recent drafts, check out: baseballamerica.com/t/organization-reports/

PHOENIX While growing up in Cuba, right-hander **Yoan Lopez** had friends in the hotel industry with access to the internet. They downloaded information, pictures and statistics on the Diamondbacks, and Lopez followed closely.

"It was actually my favorite team," Lopez said. "This is a dream that came true."

The 22-year-old Lopez gave them something to dream about in his first bullpen session of the spring on Feb. 20. Seven days after landing in Arizona, Lopez showed a four-pitch arsenal to **Tony La Russa**, **Dave Stewart** and other brass watching. There were

no radar guns that first day on Lopez, who is said to sit at 95 mph and has touched 100 mph, not that it mattered.

"Here he is having his first big league throw, and I didn't see a guy who had any kind of fear. I thought he was impressive," La Russa said.

The Diamondbacks have double-digit candidates for rotation spots behind **Josh Collmenter** and **Jeremy Hellickson**, and Lopez has one of those clearly in his sights.

"I came from Cuba with one purpose, to reach the big leagues, and I'm sure that I will be there," Lopez said through interpreter **Hatuey Mendoza**, the Diamondbacks' liaison to Latin America.

Soon?

"Pronto. Muy pronto," Lopez said.

Lopez's \$8.25 million bonus was a major league record for an international amateur, and the Diamondbacks also will have to pay another \$8 million in taxes for exceeding their

international signing pool.

Among the reasons for signing with the Diamondbacks over other suitors including the Padres and Giants, Lopez said, was the opportunity to make such a quick rise.

"I trust in myself a lot," Lopez said. "I know what I am capable of bringing out there on the field, and that's exactly what I am going for. I'm going to do the best that I can to try to win one of those spots. That is what I am here for."

SNAKE BITES

■ Arizona planned to initiate a spring training series against the state's three NCAA Division I teams with a game against Arizona State on March 3, followed by games against Arizona and Grand Canyon, which is coached by former Diamondback **Andy Stankiewicz**, in a three-year rotation.

■ Outfielder **Matt Bailey**, 20, was suspended 50 games by MLB for testing positive for an amphetamine. The third-round pick last June out of a Tallahassee, Fla., high school hit went 12-for-45 in his debut with Rookie-level Missoula.



Yoan Lopez

BILL MITCHELL

COLORADO | Rockies

BY JACK ETKIN

Back In Control

DENVER Confident he had overcome the control problems that marred his 2014 season, **Ryan Warner** left for spring training one month before the start of minor league camp. He was eager to leave the cold of his Colorado Springs home and throw for coaches.

"I feel a lot better than I did at the end of last season," the 6-foot-7 Warner said. "But it's always different when that hitter gets in there. But all I got to do is almost erase the hitter and just keep throwing to the catcher like I have been."

A third-round supplemental pick in 2012 out of Pine Creek High in Colorado Springs, Warner went 1-4, 6.20 in 11 starts for Rookie-level Tri-City last season, averaging 8.4 walks and 5.3 strikeouts per nine innings while throwing seven wild pitches and hitting seven batters. When the tailspin worsened, the Rockies shut Warner down for the final three weeks of the season.

Warner's problems began in spring training. His arm slot and arm path were inconsistent, and he badly missed high to both sides.

"If anybody in their right mind can keep battling in the way he does and the way he did going through all the struggles he had, it says about who he is," said **Frank Gonzales**, Tri-City's pitching coach last year. "A lot of people would have quit. It was that bad, honestly."

Warner began throwing in November with a former high school teammate. He said the ball "started feeling better and better. I finally started to find it. And then as I was throwing bullpens, it just felt better."

Before leaving for spring training, Warner drove two hours to Gonzales' Fort Collins, Colo., home where during a 25-pitch bullpen, Warner's posture and delivery were cleaner and, unlike last year, he finished his pitches.

"Just a lot better body language and looked like had some confidence in what he was doing," Gonzales said. "He had a process to him. Threw some balls for strikes to both sides of the plate, which wasn't happening before."

ROCKY ROADS

■ Shortstop **Trevor Story**, 22, was invited to his first big league camp. He split 2014 between high Class A Modesto (.332/.436/.582) and Double-A Tulsa (.200/.302/.380).

■ **Doug Jones**, who had 303 career saves, will begin his professional coaching career as pitching coach at their new short-season Boise affiliate with Gonzales serving as manager.

LOS ANGELES | Dodgers

BY BILL PLUNKETT

Catcher Or Infielder?

LOS ANGELES Whether **Austin Barnes** is an infielder in catcher's gear or a catcher who moonlights as an infielder, the Dodgers feel they added an intriguing prospect when they acquired Barnes from the Marlins this winter.

Dodgers president of baseball operations **Andrew Friedman** called Barnes' skill set "a bucketful of really interesting qualities—nothing that you'd watch in a workout and would jump out at you but a culmination of a lot of different skills and tools."

The Dodgers are most intrigued by Barnes' offensive abilities. Over four minor league seasons since the Marlins made him their ninth-round draft pick out of Arizona State, Barnes has hit .298/.390/.431 with more walks than strikeouts.

"He has really good decision-making skills at the plate," Friedman said. "He's elite at making contact."

An infielder until adding catching to his resume as a junior at Arizona State, the 5-foot-9, 195-pound Barnes looks more like a second baseman but doesn't feel an urgency to categorize himself as one or the other.

"Wherever they need me to play," Barnes said. "I prepare for both."

Barnes played 73 and 75 games at catcher each of the past two years while splitting time between high Class A and Double-A.

"There's obviously stuff that he needs to learn and get better at," Friedman said. "As he does that and he develops more as a catcher, the infield play will be diminished. But I think his versatility is a useful thing for any manager."

L.A. CONFIDENTIAL

■ **P.J. Forbes** resigned as manager of high Class A Rancho Cucamonga for personal reasons. Forbes will be replaced by **Bill Haselman** (previously manager at low Class A Great Lakes). Replacing Haselman at Great Lakes will be **Luis Matos**, 36, who was scheduled to be a coach for the Loons.

■ The Dodgers continued to collect organizational depth behind their bullpen, signing righthanders **B.J. Rosenberg** and **Ramon Troncoso** to minor league contracts.



Austin Barnes

SAN DIEGO | Padres

BY TOM KRASOVIC

Padres Add Alou

SAN DIEGO Not satisfied with adding several righthanded sluggers to the major league roster, Padres general manager **A.J. Preller** found another decorated righty slugger to help bring along San Diego's farm system.

Moises Alou, a six-time National League all-star, joined Preller's staff as special assistant of player development. The former outfielder also serves as GM of the Leones del Escogido in the Dominican League, a job he's held since 2009.

"I had a lot of offers to work with different teams over the years," Alou told UTSanDiego.com. "For some reason, me and A.J. clicked. I wanted to be part of what's going on in San Diego. It got to the point that I felt with the things I learned playing the game, being a GM during winter ball, I liked dealing with young players. I thought if I didn't take the job, it was going to go to waste. There's so many things I want to share."

Alou, 48, played for 17 years in the major leagues. The Pirates drafted him second overall in January 1986 and he entered the majors with them in 1990. He played for six other teams, all in the National League, and finished his career with a .303 batting average, 2,134 hits, 332 homers and 1,287 RBI in 1,942 games played.

Alou's new colleagues will include former Cubs teammate **Mark Prior**.

Prior, 34, enters his second season with the organization and his first as the club's pitching coordinator, having joined the baseball operations department in December 2013.

"I enjoyed the scouting last year, but I was looking to get more involved in player development and get closer to the field," said Prior, who studied both amateur and professional players in 2014. "I'm excited and extremely humbled by the opportunity, to have a chance to hopefully affect young players."

FATHER FIGURES

■ Former Long Beach State coach **Dave Snow**, 63, joined the Padres as a player development consultant. Snow, who also scouted for the Rockies, coached at Loyola Marymount as well as leading the Dirtbags to the 1998 College World Series and was BA's coach of the year in 1986 and 1989.

■ **Luis Ortiz**, 44, joined the Padres as both the field and hitting coordinator after spending the last two seasons as the cultural development and lower level hitting coordinator for the Indians. He and Preller worked together with the Rangers.

SAN FRANCISCO | Giants

BY ANDY BAGGARLY

Mac The Knife Feeling Better

SAN FRANCISCO Outfielder **Mac Williamson** and righthander **Derek Law** were roommates in Arizona this offseason, both working to come back from Tommy John surgery.

In terms of their rehab schedule, though, they were the odd couple.

"Being a position player, it has its own set of challenges," said Williamson, a power-hitting right fielder, who had surgery last April. "For pitchers, they're on a program that's been done so many times. They know exactly how much exercise to do and how many pitches to throw every day. They warm up on the mound and can stay warm in the dugout, whereas I might stand out there and go 30 minutes between throws."

It's been much longer since Williamson made his last throw from the outfield. He began last season with high Class A San Jose, a level he dominated in 2013 (.292/.375/.504, 25 HRs, 89 RBIs)—forced to return there because he was trying to work through elbow tenderness. In the California League, at least he could DH while he received treatment. But when he started throwing again two weeks into the season, the elbow hadn't improved.

"If I were a pitcher, we'd have taken care of it right away but for a position player, it's more of a coin flip," said Williamson, a third-round pick in 2012 out of Wake Forest. "We decided it was in everyone's best interests to get it done."

The rehab calendar was just as grueling for a position player, and perhaps even more tedious. Williamson had to count every rehab swing he took, and after missing so many at-bats in 2014, the urge was always to swing more. When he reported to instructional league, coaches wouldn't let him shag because they didn't want him to be tempted to throw.

An athletic player with plus arm strength before the injury, Williamson, 24, began playing catch in November and hopes to open the season in right field for Double-A Richmond.

GIANTICS

■ Law's rehab also has gone smoothly following Tommy John surgery at the end of June. He was scheduled to begin throwing off a mound the first week of March.

■ Shortstop **Kelby Tomlinson**, who went from nine stolen bases in 2013 to 49 last season for Richmond, might be the fastest player in big league camp. Tomlinson put the "flying" in Flying Squirrels when he set a club record with a five-steal game last May.

Bishop plays '4MOM' with Alzheimer's

BY MICHAEL LANANNA

A frame sits on the desk of Braden Bishop's childhood bedroom. There's no picture in it. Just three words, typed in heavy font. Bishop framed them himself, as a teenager, in San Carlos, Calif., not long after he heard his travel ball coach say them for the first time:

"Adversity breeds strength."

Bishop has always thrived on those sorts of simple phrases, ideas that he can lock onto with unrelenting focus, to the point that they become embedded within him, like pieces of genetic code. They're perpetual reminders, constant calls to action, self-charging motivators. They're more than words. They're batteries. Gasoline.

"I'm pretty big with words," Bishop says. "I think for myself to have ones that are significant in my life and applied to my life directly, it's just kind of a reminder when I'm tired or lacking energy that I'm doing it for something bigger than myself—that there's a way to pick myself up."

Randy Bishop, Braden's father, gets goosebumps when he thinks of the day he walked into his garage and lied on 12-year-old Braden's bench press—curious to see how much weight his son could lift. He grabbed the bar and noticed a piece of white cardboard taped on the ceiling above him. Scribbled in black ink, in Braden's handwriting, were the words, "2015 MLB draft."

Braden was drafted six years later, out of high school in 2012, and there's little doubt the junior outfielder will be drafted again, out of Washington, this June. That's the power of Bishop's focus. His scribbled words take life.

Now Bishop has added a new mantra to his mental Rolodex. It's not written on cardboard. It's not displayed in a frame. It's on his skin. Every day for seven months, he's written the same number and three letters on his left forearm, in black Sharpie, diligently tracing over every curve so the message won't fade: "4MOM."

4MOM is typed on the bottom of all of his workout cards. It's on a T-shirt he wears religiously. Someday, it's what he hopes to name his own foundation.

4MOM is strength. 4MOM is bred by adversity.

A Fluke

There was a phone call. Seven months ago. Bishop doesn't know if a single sound left his mouth. For once in his life, there were no words he could turn to.

Braden just sat on the couch of his Seattle apartment and listened. He listened as Randy and his mother, Suzy, gave him the news he had feared would come for months, news that would change life as he knew it: His mother, at age 52, was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's.

Suzy could forget everything in a year, in three years, in 25 years—there was no telling. She could take medication to slow the process. But there was no cure.

Braden didn't have words. All he had was the sudden pang of despair that swept over him, the terrible questions that gnawed at his heart:

"What if my mom doesn't remember who I am in a year?"

"What if everything I've done up to this point, she doesn't remember?"

"Is this my fault? Should I go home? Should I leave school?"

There had been signs. Randy, Braden and his 16-year-old brother, Hunter, had noticed subtle changes in Suzy, moments of forgetfulness, moments when she struggled to find words. She had battled debilitating migraines for a decade. And she had undergone every test in the book—every MRI, every PET scan—but there were no answers.

It was Randy who first urged doctors to test Suzy for Alzheimer's—at the very least, to rule it out. Early-onset Alzheimer's is a rare form of the disease, affecting just 5 percent of people who have it—or roughly 200,000 people in the United States—according to the Alzheimer's Association. Early-onset Alzheimer's—or Alzheimer's that strikes people younger than 65—is most often caused by a genetic predisposition. It's usually inherited.



Washington's Braden Bishop raises money for Alzheimer's research

Suzy was tested. She didn't have the gene.

But Randy and Suzy kept pushing for more tests, kept pushing until a blood test at Stanford confirmed their worst suspicions.

A former runner on the UCLA track team, Suzy's only glaring physical issue had been the migraines she suffered, and even those had no impact on the development of the disease, doctors said. In fact, doctors couldn't explain why Suzy developed the condition.

"The doctors called me a fluke," Suzy said. "That's what it is. I have no history in my family. It is an absolute fluke."

Suzy is still in the early stages. She takes one pill every day that's supposed to help slow down the deterioration, but she's not sure how much it helps. There are momentary lapses, times when the frustration mounts for her and her family. Sometimes, she'll forget a little thing. Sometimes, she'll forget something bigger.

"An example, the other night, my whole family's in a hotel room, and the heat wasn't working in the room," Braden said. "So she picked up the phone and called the front desk, and they said, 'Hello, this is the front desk, how can we help you?' And then she had to turn to my dad and say, 'Hey, what was I calling about again?'"

"But if you asked her who the first president of the United States was, she would have no problem. Or if you asked her which events she ran in track in college, she could tell you."

Suzy doesn't sound like a woman struggling to cope with her condition. Her voice rings loud, clear, sharp—full of vigor—through a cell phone. Braden said he's proud of his mom for the way she's fighting.

Still, there are difficult times. Hunter, in particular, has taken time to come to grips with it all, Braden said. It certainly hasn't left Braden's mind—not for a single second since his parents called him seven months ago.

"It's a negative situation. If we're being honest, it sucks. And I hate seeing my mom go through it," Braden said. "But I knew that I had a choice to be strong for her and help make a difference or just let it be negative and be down about it. And I knew if my mom could see me be strong, then that might provide some strength for her as well."

"Right from the moment that call ended, I started thinking of ways I could make a difference."

Pulling For A Cure

Dave Rak noticed a change. It was a subtle one—perhaps one that no one else but him would notice—but it was a change nonetheless.

Rak is the Washington baseball team's strength and conditioning coach. He spends almost every waking hour with the Huskies' players. He knows their personalities, their tendencies, their physical limits. He's always known Bishop to be a ball of energy, a guy who loves to work out, who almost always exudes excitement. There's a reason he's team captain.

On this day, seven months ago, Bishop was a tad quieter. Out of sync. And Rak was concerned. The trainer pulled Bishop into his office, and Bishop explained what his mother

had just been diagnosed with.

Two days later, Rak came to Bishop with a proposal. For months, Rak had been toying around with the idea of holding a charity deadlift competition. He had a friend at a gym in Renton, Wash., that hosts those types of events every Saturday. Rak just didn't have a cause. For Bishop, it was the opposite—he had a cause, but he didn't have a platform.

"I just pulled him into the office after we finished lifting, and I asked him if the charity deadlift competition was something he'd be comfortable with," Rak recalled. "He was fired up. His face lit up."

From that day forward, Rak never saw Bishop be anything other than himself. The spark returned.

As fall progressed and the Huskies prepared for the upcoming season, Bishop worked tirelessly along with Rak to organize the event, scheduled for mid-January. Bishop set up a donation page on the Alzheimer's Association website and organized a silent auction to take place at the event—all to raise money for Alzheimer's research.

He worked largely behind the scenes. He didn't want to cause a distraction for his teammates, and he didn't want any of them to feel obligated to carry any of the burden.

"I remember a couple of days before (the deadlift event), we had a conditioning session at 6 o'clock," said redshirt senior righthander Josh Fredendall, one of Bishop's best friends. "We were talking about something else, and (Bishop) was like, 'Real quick, by the way, you guys know about my mom. I'm having a charity event. If you guys want to make it out, that would be awesome. If you can't, that's totally understandable.'"

All 34 teammates showed up. So did Washington alums, like Diamondbacks infielder Jake Lamb. So did players at other schools, like Oregon State. So did nearly 200 people, all gathered to pull for a cure. Between the auction and the donation page, almost \$7,000 was raised.

Both Suzy and Randy flew in from San Carlos to be there. Suzy had known about the event for months. In fact, Braden had called her just two days after her diagnosis, asking her for her blessing.

"It was very fresh after the diagnosis," Suzy said. "And I said, 'Bray, I don't really know what it means at this point, but I do know that I want you to take it and do what you want with it, because whatever it would be, it would be very special for me.'"

And special it was.

"When I had originally gotten off the phone with my parents and they told me my mom had Alzheimer's, to see my mom's face and the emotions she felt the day that I held the charity event for her, that's exactly the difference I wanted to make for her and to show her the support she showed me growing up," Braden said.

And it was only the start.

Movie Life

Randy met Suzy on a movie set.

It was 1986. Randy's family was in the movie business—his great grandfather had produced silent films, and his father was, at that time, a producer at Universal Studios. Randy had intended to play baseball at UNLV, but an arm injury his senior year in high school derailed his career before it could take flight. Depressed, Randy left Las Vegas and went to work for his father.

As it turned out, Suzy was his father's production assistant.

"Honestly, from the moment she saw me, she knew. I was it, man," Randy says cheekily, with Suzy sitting right next to him. She just laughs and apologizes for her husband.

The two have been together ever since, nearing 29 years. They traveled the world together, made movies together, "made a couple of pretty great kids," Randy says. Eventually, Randy settled into a 20-year law enforcement job, and now he owns his own private investigation company. But Suzy continued to produce, continued to move up the ranks. At one point, she was the vice president of production at NBC. Starting in 2003, she was the head of the Vancouver Film School in British Columbia. Suzy produced up until the point she started showing symptoms.

"I know Suzy doesn't like to toot her own horn, but I will," Randy says. "I'm very proud of her. She worked at the old Cannon Films for a long time, did a bunch of those Chuck Norris shows years back . . . She started shows like 'JAG' and 'Law & Order.' She won an Emmy for 'Separate But Equal,' which was the story of Thurgood Marshall . . . That was her life."

Braden was part of that life, too. When he was very young, he would accompany his mother on trips to New York, Toronto—as far as Prague—as she worked on various projects.

"I didn't want to leave him," Suzy says. "I always wanted to be with him. In the movies we worked 14-hour days, so he was with me every time I could get him to the set."

Adversity Breeds Strength

Braden thought it was all over. He thought he was done. Finished.

It was his freshman year at Washington, a May 11 game against Utah. On a push bunt, Braden aggressively slid into first base—a mistake. He looked at his thumb and thought he'd never be able to hold a bat again. The break was gruesome.

Immediately, the Bishops flew Braden back to California to have reconstructive surgery. All the while, Braden feared for his future.

"The whole weekend, after surgery, (my mom) didn't leave my side, through the terrible pain I was going through, nothing but positive talk and telling me I was going to be all right," Braden said. "I know a lot of moms would do that for their sons, but for her to do that for me after what I had been through, that was something I'll never forget."

Like his mother kept telling him, everything did turn out all right.

Now Braden is trying to return the favor: Suzy is the one faced with adversity; Braden is the one trying to lend her strength.

Braden understands that there might never be a cure for his mother, but that won't stop him from trying to find a cure for someone else. He's still encouraging donations at his Alzheimer's Association page at <http://bit.ly/17yqoc6>. He's organizing a charity softball game for September. He's in talks to arrange a charity concert with an "American Idol" contestant. He wants to make more "4MOM" T-shirts and wristbands.

But Bishop isn't giving up on his baseball dreams, either. This year—his junior year—is the biggest year of all. The draft is looming, and that's something he's thought about since his childhood days, since he wrote "2015 MLB draft" on the ceiling of his garage.

By all accounts, Bishop should be taken fairly high this June. He's a toolsy outfielder who entered this season batting .292/.379/.340 in 332 at-bats. He's off to a .364/.481/.545

start in his first 22 at-bats this year, and he's impressed his head coach, Lindsay Meggs, with his ability to balance baseball with the rigors of life. That's a trait uncommon for a player in his position.

"That's one thing if you're the fourth outfielder, who doesn't have as much on the line professionally," Meggs said. "But for him to be able to take that approach and have that perspective . . . and to be able to put baseball—to some degree—on the back burner and focus on his family and what's important to him, that's about as mature an approach to this situation as anybody could have."

Braden's mother has always been supportive of his baseball dreams. She was a team mom through his high school days, hosting team dinners and get-togethers, letting players sleep over on nights before game days. These days, Braden is trying to use baseball to give back to her. He's excited about the prospect of what a major league platform could do for his fundraising. His parents say they're convinced he'll start his own foundation someday.

"I play because I love the game. And I always have since I first stepped on the field when I was four years old," Braden said. "But now there's this added motivation for me, and it does get emotional, because I know if I succeed, I'm doing it for my mom. And when I fail, my mom's watching."

"It's something I don't take lightly. Focus-wise, it's only sharpened my focus."

4MOM

"There are a good days, and there are bad days."

That's the Alzheimer's trope—a phrase commonly heard in movies, a phrase uttered by doctors and from many patients themselves.

But Suzy doesn't subscribe to that sort of thinking. She says every day needs to be a good day. Every day needs to be a day she goes outside and smells the flowers, a day she goes for a run, a day she plays with her dog, a day she writes.

And today? Today is a great day.

Today is Friday, February 20. Suzy is sitting in a hotel room

in Mesa, Ariz., with her husband. In a few hours, the proud parents will head to Sloan Park to watch Braden and the Huskies take on Oklahoma in the Pac-12/Big-12 Challenge.

There's a clear exuberance in Suzy's voice. There's strength in it, and she speaks at a steady pace. At times, she stops to search for a word. There are moments when Randy steps in for her. When she's asked about the diagnosis—about how she felt when she received the news—she's not sure what to say. She says she needs to think for a minute.

But whenever she's asked about Braden, she can't help but gush. She says she hopes she doesn't embarrass him—she knows he doesn't like to talk about himself. Randy says he gets that from his mom.

Suzy says she's always marveled at Braden's ability to be a mentor, how at every level—middle school, high school, college—his peers always turned to him for guidance. She says she never used to understand how that happened. But now she does.

"And you know what else?" she says, a sense of urgency in her voice. "He helped me embrace it. He really did. At first, I was very reluctant to tell people (about the Alzheimer's) and this and that, but right away, I felt OK, just based on how he did it."

"So I was like, 'Forget the embarrassment.' . . . It's fine. It is what it is. He's always been an old soul. That's who Braden is—he's made up of wisdom and an old soul."

In a few years, it's possible Suzy might not remember all of the details of Braden's life. She might not remember the days with him on movie sets or the time he broke his thumb or the day he'll assuredly get drafted. There'll come a point where she might not remember today.

But today is still a great day, because today she gets to see her son do what he loves. Today she gets to see Braden Bishop on a baseball field. And she knows that every hit, every catch, every throw, every action he takes, he'll take for the number and three letters he's written lovingly—in black Sharpie—on his left arm.

That, at least, she knows won't fade.

Braden won't let it.

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Baseball America

RANKINGS THROUGH FEB. 23

COLLEGE TOP 25 RANKINGS

RK.	SCHOOL	W-L	LAST WEEK	PREV. RANK
1.	Vanderbilt	4-2	2-1	1
2.	Louisiana State	6-1	3-1	2
3.	Houston	6-1	3-1	3
4.	Virginia	7-0	4-0	4
5.	Texas Tech	8-1	4-1	5
6.	Florida	6-1	3-1	6
7.	Texas Christian	6-1	3-1	7
8.	UCLA	6-1	3-1	11
9.	Texas	7-2	5-0	10
10.	Oklahoma State	4-3	3-1	9
11.	Miami	5-3	1-3	8
12.	South Carolina	6-1	4-0	13
13.	Mississippi State	8-0	4-0	14

RK.	SCHOOL	W-L	LAST WEEK	PREV. RANK
14.	Rice	5-3	3-1	15
15.	Central Florida	7-0	4-0	22
16.	Maryland	5-1	2-1	16
17.	Louisville	3-3	1-2	12
18.	Arizona State	4-2	2-2	18
19.	North Carolina	4-2	1-2	17
20.	Oregon	7-1	5-0	20
21.	Kennesaw State	5-2	3-1	19
22.	UC Santa Barbara	6-1	3-1	24
23.	Dallas Baptist	6-1	3-1	NR
24.	Mississippi	4-2	2-1	NR
25.	Florida State	4-3	1-3	21

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Freshman Top 50 bolstered by addition of former No. 1 Aiken

Get a head start on preparing for the draft in June—and for years to come—with a look at the top 50 college prospects in each class. The senior class list has become even more important in recent years as many teams have taken to drafting college seniors in the top 10 rounds to save money for later picks. All college juniors and seniors are eligible for the 2015 draft. Asterisks (*) denote freshmen and sophomores who are draft-eligible, either because of their age or because they’re attending junior college or a post-secondary school.

SENIORS

Rank.	Player, Pos., College	B-T	Ht.	Wt.	Last Drafted
1.	Austin Byler, 1b, Nevada	L-R	6-3	225	Nationals '14 (9)
2.	Ashton Perritt, of/rhp, Liberty	R-R	6-3	205	Braves '14 (17)
3.	Sikes Orvis, 1b, Mississippi	L-R	6-3	235	Red Sox '11 (19)
4.	Benton Moss, rhp, North Carolina	R-R	6-2	185	Giants '14 (15)
5.	Parker French, rhp, Texas	L-R	6-2	218	Tigers '14 (19)
6.	Preston Morrison, rhp, Texas Christian	R-R	6-2	185	Never
7.	Zach Zehner, of, Cal Poly	R-R	6-4	210	Blue Jays '14 (7)
8.	David Berg, rhp, UCLA	R-R	6-0	194	Rangers '14 (17)
9.	Connor Barron, of, Southern Mississippi	L-R	6-2	193	Marlins '11 (3)
10.	Connor Panas, 3b, Canisius	L-R	6-0	214	Never
11.	Dominic Moreno, rhp, Texas Tech	R-R	6-1	200	Cardinals '14 (33)
12.	Alex Close, 1b, Liberty	R-R	6-4	225	Royals '14 (27)
13.	Tim Proudfoot, ss, Texas Tech	R-R	5-11	190	Athletics '14 (21)
14.	Kyle Martin, 1b, South Carolina	L-L	6-1	240	Angels '14 (20)
15.	Eric Cheray, c, Missouri State	L-R	6-3	210	Athletics '14 (17)
16.	D.J. Ruhlman, 3b, Seton Hall	R-R	6-1	185	Never
17.	Josh Eldridge, of, Old Dominion	L-L	6-3	205	Never
18.	Kade Scivicque, c, LSU	R-R	5-11	220	Never
19.	Aaron Garza, rhp, Houston	R-R	6-4	200	Brewers '14 (29)
20.	Tommy Williams, ss, Central Florida	R-R	6-2	192	D-backs '11 (20)
21.	Kenny Towns, 3b, Virginia	R-R	6-0	185	Never
22.	Grant Watson, lhp, UCLA	L-L	6-0	181	Never
23.	Bobby Poyner, lhp, Florida	L-L	6-0	205	Never
24.	Riley Moore, c, Arizona	L-R	6-3	190	Phillies '11 (21)
25.	Garrett Mundell, rhp, Fresno State	R-R	6-7	235	D-backs '14 (18)
26.	Zach Lucas, 2b/3b, Louisville	R-R	6-0	190	Pirates '14 (29)
27.	Dylan Moore, 2b-ss, Central Florida	R-R	6-0	194	Never
28.	Jake Peevyhouse, of, Arizona State	L-L	5-10	184	Never
29.	Shaun Chase, c, Oregon	R-R	6-0	214	Never
30.	Taylor Guilbeau, lhp, Alabama	L-L	6-4	180	Yankees '11 (39)
31.	Jerry Keel, lhp, Cal State Northridge	L-L	6-6	240	Never
32.	Sal Annunziata, 1b, Seton Hall	R-R	5-11	205	Never
33.	Quinnton Mack, of, New Mexico State	R-R	6-0	195	Never
34.	James Vasquez, 1b, Central Florida	L-L	6-0	230	Never
35.	Chris Keck, 3b, UCLA	L-R	6-2	188	Never
36.	John Clay Reeves, c, Rice	R-R	6-1	185	Never
37.	Tyler Nurdin, lhp, Oklahoma State	R-L	6-3	208	Indians '11 (28)
38.	Josh Roeder, rhp, Nebraska	R-R	6-0	174	Never
39.	Trevor Fitts, rhp, Mississippi State	R-R	6-2	223	Never
40.	Luke Crumley, rhp, Georgia	R-R	6-6	193	Never
41.	Blaise Salter, c, Michigan State	R-R	6-5	245	Never
42.	Josh Tobias, 2b/3b, Florida	B-R	5-10	205	Nationals '11 (31)
43.	Andrew Istler, rhp, Duke	R-R	5-11	180	Never
44.	Logan Nottebrok, 1b, Texas A&M	R-R	6-3	225	Never
45.	Josh Reavis, c, Radford	R-R	6-1	195	Never
46.	Bryant Holtmann, lhp, Florida State	R-L	6-3	220	Pirates '14 (37)
47.	Nick Richter, 3b, Rider	R-R	6-3	195	Never
48.	Derek O'Dell, ss, Texas Christian	L-R	6-1	185	Red Sox '11 (42)
49.	Blake Allemand, ss, Texas A&M	B-R	5-10	175	Never
50.	Alex Luna, rhp, Alabama-Birmingham	R-R	6-5	204	Never

JUNIORS

Rank.	Player, Pos., College	B-T	Ht.	Wt.	Last Drafted
1.	Kyle Funkhouser, rhp, Louisville	R-R	6-2	218	Never
2.	Dansby Swanson, ss, Vanderbilt	R-R	6-0	190	Rockies '12 (38)
3.	Nathan Kirby, lhp, Virginia	L-L	6-2	185	Never
4.	Alex Bregman, ss, Louisiana State	R-R	6-0	190	Red Sox '12 (29)
5.	Riley Ferrell, rhp, Texas Christian	R-R	6-1	200	Never
6.	Ian Happ, of, Cincinnati	B-R	6-0	205	Never
7.	Michael Matuella, rhp, Duke	R-R	6-7	220	Never
8.	Kyle Cody, rhp, Kentucky	R-R	6-7	245	Phillies '12 (33)
9.	Carson Fulmer, rhp, Vanderbilt	R-R	5-11	195	Red Sox '12 (15)
10.	Walker Buehler, rhp, Vanderbilt	R-R	6-1	160	Pirates '12 (14)
11.	Jake Lemoine, rhp, Houston	R-R	6-5	220	Rangers '12 (21)
12.	Dillon Tate, rhp, UC Santa Barbara	R-R	6-2	185	Never
13.	James Kaprielian, rhp, UCLA	R-R	6-4	200	Mariners '12 (40)
14.	Tyler Jay, lhp, Illinois	L-L	6-1	175	Never
15.	D.J. Stewart, of, Florida State	L-R	6-0	230	Yankees '12 (28)
16.	Richie Martin, ss, Florida	R-R	6-0	185	Mariners '12 (38)
17.	Cody Ponce, rhp, Cal Poly Pomona	R-R	6-5	235	Never
18.	C.J. Hinojosa, ss, Texas	R-R	5-11	179	Astros '12 (26)



Dansby Swanson rates as the top junior position player

19.	Kevin Newman, ss, Arizona	R-R	6-1	180	Never
20.	Marc Brakeman, rhp, Stanford	L-R	6-1	180	Never
21.	Alex Young, lhp, Texas Christian	L-L	6-2	205	Rangers '12 (32)
22.	Thomas Eshelman, rhp, Cal State Fullerton	R-R	6-3	190	Never
23.	Blake Trahan, ss, Louisiana-Lafayette	R-R	5-9	180	Never
24.	Brett Lilek, lhp, Arizona State	L-L	6-4	194	Mariners '12 (37)
25.	Christin Stewart, of, Tennessee	L-R	6-0	205	Never
26.	Steven Duggar, of, Clemson	L-R	6-2	190	Never
27.	Tyler Ferguson, rhp, Vanderbilt	R-R	6-3	225	Giants '12 (40)
28.	Chris Shaw, 1b, Boston College	L-R	6-3	248	Mets '12 (26)
29.	Andrew Suarez, lhp, Miami	L-L	6-2	205	Nationals '14 (2)
30.	Joe McCarthy, of, Virginia	L-L	6-3	215	Never
31.	Gio Brusa, of, Pacific	S-R	6-3	190	Braves '12 (37)
32.	Justin Garza, rhp, Cal State Fullerton	R-R	5-11	160	Indians '12 (26)
33.	Kyle Twomey, lhp, Southern California	L-L	6-3	175	Athletics '12 (3)
34.	Mark Mathias, 2b-3b, Cal Poly	R-R	6-0	185	Never
35.	Brandon Waddell, lhp, Virginia	L-L	6-3	180	Never
36.	Mikey White, ss, Alabama	R-R	6-1	195	Mets '12 (34)
37.	Garrett Cleavinger, lhp, Oregon	L-L	6-0	220	Never
38.	Daniel Pinero, ss, Virginia	R-R	6-5	210	Astros '13 (20)
39.	Ryan Burr, rhp, Arizona State	R-R	6-4	224	Rangers '12 (33)
40.	Alex Robinson, lhp, Maryland	L-L	6-3	225	Never
41.	Jon Harris, rhp, Missouri State	R-R	6-4	185	Blue Jays '12 (33)
42.	A.J. Minter, lhp, Texas A&M	L-L	6-0	210	Tigers '12 (38)
43.	Eric Hanhold, rhp, Florida	R-R	6-5	195	Phillies '12 (40)
44.	Josh Sborz, rhp, Virginia	R-R	6-3	225	Never
45.	Kyle Holder, ss, San Diego	L-R	6-1	185	Never
46.	Andrew Sopko, rhp, Gonzaga	R-R	6-2	200	Padres '12 (14)
47.	Kevin Duchene, lhp, Illinois	L-L	6-2	210	Never
48.	Zack Erwin, lhp, Clemson	L-L	6-5	195	Never
49.	Trevor Megill, rhp, Loyola Marymount	R-R	6-8	245	Cardinals '14 (3)
50.	Josh Staumont, rhp, Azusa Pacific	R-R	6-2	205	Never

SOPHOMORES

Rank.	Player, Pos., College	B-T	Ht.	Wt.	Last Drafted
1.	Phil Bickford, rhp, JC of Southern Nevada*	R-R	6-4	200	Blue Jays '13 (1)
2.	Robert Tyler, rhp, Georgia	L-R	6-4	210	Orioles '13 (28)
3.	Cal Quantrill, rhp, Stanford	R-R	6-3	185	Yankees '13 (26)
4.	Tyler Alexander, lhp, Texas Christian*	L-L	6-3	180	Tigers '13 (23)
5.	Connor Jones, rhp, Virginia	R-R	6-3	200	Padres '13 (21)
6.	Ben DeLuzio, of, Florida State	R-R	6-3	190	Marlins '13 (3)
7.	Ryan Boldt, of, Nebraska	L-R	6-2	195	Red Sox '13 (22)
8.	Nick Banks, of, Texas A&M	L-L	6-0	200	Never
9.	Zack Collins, c, Miami	L-R	6-3	220	Reds '13 (27)
10.	Matt Krook, lhp, Oregon	L-L	6-4	195	Marlins '13 (1s)

11.	Logan Shore, rhp, Florida	R-R	6-1	210	Twins '13 (29)
12.	Will Crowe, rhp, South Carolina	R-R	6-3	230	Indians '13 (31)
13.	Garrett Hampson, ss, Long Beach State	R-R	5-11	165	Nationals '13 (26)
14.	Chris Okey, c, Clemson	R-R	6-0	195	Padres '13 (31)
15.	Cavan Biggio, 2b, Notre Dame	L-R	6-1	180	Phillies '13 (29)
16.	Bryan Reynolds, of, Vanderbilt	L-R	6-2	210	Never
17.	Keegan Thompson, rhp-1b, Auburn	R-R	6-1	208	Never
18.	Chandler Eden, rhp, Oregon State	R-R	6-4	175	Marlins '13 (36)
19.	Garrett Williams, lhp, Oklahoma State	L-L	6-1	199	Padres '13 (33)
20.	Jared Poche', lhp, Louisiana State	R-L	6-1	207	Never
21.	Travis Lakins, rhp, Ohio State*	R-R	6-1	175	Never
22.	Dakota Hudson, rhp, Mississippi State	R-R	6-5	190	Rangers '13 (36)
23.	Sheldon Neuse, ss-rhp, Oklahoma	R-R	6-0	195	Rangers '13 (38)
24.	Hayden Stone, rhp, Vanderbilt	R-R	6-0	185	Never
25.	Eric Lauer, lhp, Kent State	R-L	6-3	205	Blue Jays '13 (17)
26.	Bryan Garcia, rhp, Miami	R-R	6-1	205	Never
27.	A.J. Puk, lhp-1b, Florida	L-L	6-7	230	Tigers '13 (35)
28.	Dane Dunning, rhp, Florida	R-R	6-3	190	Blue Jays '13 (34)
29.	Willie Abreu, of, Miami	L-L	6-4	225	Reds '13 (14)
30.	Zach Burdi, rhp, Louisville	R-R	6-3	209	Never
31.	John Duplantier, rhp, Rice*	R-R	6-4	210	Never
32.	Alec Hansen, rhp, Oklahoma	R-R	6-7	235	Rockies '13 (25)
33.	Jake Elliott, rhp, Oklahoma	R-R	6-7	210	Never
34.	Zach Jackson, rhp, Arkansas	R-R	6-4	215	Never
35.	Reagan Bazar, rhp, Louisiana-Lafayette	R-R	6-7	230	Pirates '13 (33)
36.	Mike Shawaryn, rhp, Maryland	R-R	6-3	211	Royals '13 (32)
37.	Ronnie Gideon, 3b, Texas A&M	R-R	6-3	240	Rockies '13 (35)
38.	Brett Morales, rhp, Florida	R-R	6-1	195	Reds '13 (24)
39.	Kyle Serrano, rhp, Tennessee	R-R	6-2	205	Rockies '13 (29)
40.	Stephen Wrenn, of, Georgia	R-R	6-2	175	Braves '13 (28)
41.	Tres Barrera, c, Texas	R-R	6-0	211	Never
42.	Connor Jones, lhp, Georgia	L-L	6-1	195	Never
43.	Tyler Stubblefield, lhp, Texas A&M	L-L	6-4	210	Braves '13 (36)
44.	Bailey Ober, rhp, College of Charleston	R-R	6-8	215	Never
45.	J.B. Woodman, of, Mississippi	L-R	6-2	190	Mets '13 (40)
46.	Cory Wilder, rhp, North Carolina State	R-R	6-4	223	Never
47.	Mike Donadio, of, St. John's	L-R	6-0	195	Never
48.	John Kilichowski, lhp, Vanderbilt	L-L	6-5	210	Never
49.	Ryan Moseley, rhp, Texas Tech	R-R	6-3	190	Rays '13 (36)
50.	Vince Fernandez, of, UC Riverside	L-R	6-4	205	Never

FRESHMEN

Rank.	Player, Pos., College	B-T	Ht.	Wt.	Last Drafted
1.	Brady Aiken, lhp, No school*	L-L	6-4	205	Astros '14 (1)
2.	J.B. Bukauskas, rhp, North Carolina	R-R	6-0	189	Dbacks '14 (2)
3.	David Peterson, lhp, Oregon	L-L	6-6	235	Red Sox '14 (28)
4.	J.J. Schwarz, c, Florida	R-R	6-1	205	Brewers '14 (17)
5.	Keith Weisenberg, rhp, Stanford	R-R	6-5	205	Blue Jays '14 (38)
6.	Sean Bouchard, 3b, UCLA	R-R	6-3	190	Never
7.	Tate Blackman, ss-2b, Mississippi	R-R	6-0	190	Brewers '14 (20)
8.	Jeren Kendall, of, Vanderbilt	L-R	5-11	180	Red Sox '14 (30)
9.	Isiah Gilliam, of, Chipola (Fla.) JC*	S-R	6-3	215	Cubs '14 (23)
10.	Jordan Sheffield, rhp, Vanderbilt	R-R	6-0	185	Red Sox '13 (13)
11.	Keaton McKinney, rhp, Arkansas	R-R	6-5	220	Mets '14 (28)
12.	Mac Marshall, lhp, Chipola (Fla.) JC*	R-L	6-1	187	Astros '14 (21)
13.	Cobi Johnson, rhp, Florida State	R-R	6-4	190	Padres '14 (35)
14.	Pavin Smith, of-lhp, Virginia	L-L	6-2	200	Rockies '14 (32)
15.	Elliott Cary, of, Oregon State	L-L	6'2	178	Nationals '14 (32)
16.	Bryce Montes de Oca, rhp, Missouri	R-R	6-7	262	White Sox '14 (14)
17.	Garrett Cave, rhp, Florida International	R-R	6-3	200	Yankees '14 (17)
18.	Jacob Nix, rhp, IMG Academy (post-graduate)*	R-R	6-3	200	Astros '14 (5)
19.	Alex Destino, lhp-of, South Carolina	L-L	6-2	215	Never
20.	Jake Latz, lhp, Louisiana State	R-L	6-2	198	Blue Jays '14 (11)
21.	Riley Adams, c, San Diego	R-R	6-4	210	Cubs '14 (37)
22.	K.J. Harrison, c, Oregon State	R-R	6-0	200	Indians '14 (25)
23.	Andrew Karp, rhp, Florida State	R-R	6-3	210	Never
24.	Derek Casey, rhp, Virginia	R-R	6-1	195	Cardinals '14 (22)
25.	Coltin Gerhart, of, Arizona State	R-R	5-11	210	Never
26.	J.J. Matijevic, 1b-3b, Arizona	L-R	6-2	203	Red Sox '14 (22)
27.	Scott Hurst, of, Cal State Fullerton	L-R	5-10	170	Never
28.	Michael Cantu, c-1b, Texas	R-R	6-3	237	Cubs '14 (30)
29.	Ryder Ryan, 3b-rhp, North Carolina	R-R	6-2	205	Indians '14 (40)
30.	Adam Haseley, of-lhp, Virginia	L-L	6-1	195	Never
31.	Mitch Hart, rhp, Southern California	R-R	6-4	195	Giants '14 (35)
32.	Turner Larkins, rhp, Texas A&M	R-R	6-3	200	Brewers '14 (28)
33.	Cre Finck, rhp, Central Florida	S-R	6-0	186	Brewers '14 (26)
34.	Gage Burland, rhp, Gonzaga	R-R	6-3	195	Orioles '14 (26)
35.	John Littell, of, Oklahoma State	R-R	6-4	195	Nationals '14 (39)
36.	Clark Scolamiero, of, South Carolina	L-L	6-0	175	Never
37.	Joe Gillette, 3b-of, Oregon State	R-R	6-3	195	Cardinals '14 (23)
38.	Nathan Rodriguez, c, Arkansas	R-R	5-11	205	Orioles '14 (39)
39.	Keston Hiura, 3b, UC Irvine	R-R	5-11	185	Never
40.	Dalton Guthrie, ss-2b, Florida	R-R	5-11	170	Twins '14 (40)
41.	Luke Bonfield, of, Arkansas	R-R	6-2	190	Mets '14 (21)
42.	Jake Godfrey, rhp, Louisiana State	R-R	6-3	215	Braves '14 (21)
43.	Justin Morris, c, Maryland	L-R	6-2	201	Dbacks '14 (35)
44.	Willie Rios, lhp, Maryland	S-L	6-0	199	Dbacks '14 (26)
45.	Tommy Doyle, rhp, Virginia	R-R	6-6	215	Nationals '14 (35)
46.	Carl Chester, of, Miami	R-R	6-0	190	Brewers '14 (38)
47.	C.J. Moore, of, Lamar	R-R	6-2	190	Dbacks '14 (13)
48.	Roderick Bynum, of, Arizona Western	L-R	6-1	200	Reds '14 (18)
49.	Chris McGrath, lhp, Duke	R-L	6-4	200	Mariners '14 (35)
50.	Hunter Williams, lhp-1b, North Carolina	L-L	6-3	234	Giants '14 (32)

Bond is unbreakable for Betts and Molnar

BY LES LUKACH

LOS ANGELES

Baseball has a way of connecting people through its strategy, sights, sounds and smells. Whether it's a father and son playing catch in the yard or a group of people watching from the stands, baseball has a way of captivating one's senses.

Often, though, the greatest connection happens on the field, where players ply their craft and form a brotherhood that extends well beyond the diamond.

For a pair of Southern California's top draft-eligible high school prospects, their connection is rooted on baseball fields around the region.

Chris Betts, a catcher from Long Beach Wilson High and Kyle Molnar, a righthander from Aliso Niguel (Calif.) High, have been playing together on the travel ball circuit for seven years, and that familiarity has led to their unbreakable bond.

"I think I've only shaken him off once or twice," Molnar said with a wry smile and Betts sitting a few feet away. "Since we've grown up together we know everything about each other."

Betts sees it from the receiver's end.

"Since 11 years old it's been the same catch partner every summer," Betts said. "We are always on the same page."

It didn't take long after the two began playing together with California Baseball Academy for the seeds of their friendship to be planted. Separated by 25 miles of Southern California freeways, the two often would spend the weekend at each other's homes.

In the summer of 2014, it seemed as though Betts and Molnar were joined at the hip. In addition to tournaments with CBA, each was selected to play in the prestigious Area Code Games as well as the Under Armour All-American Game at Chicago's Wrigley Field and the Perfect Game All-American Classic at San Diego's Petco Park.

These events allowed them to recognize just how close their bond is.

"It made it comfortable," Betts said on what it was like participating in those events with Molnar. "At Area Codes everybody knew



Kyle Molnar jokes that he has shaken off Chris Betts once or twice during their careers . . .

it was the Chris and Kyle show. When Kyle pitched everybody was on the rail to see what we were going to do."

For two guys who are polar opposites in terms of personality—Betts is the loud joker while Molnar is a quiet thinker—baseball is the bond that brought them together.

Jon Paino, program director of CBA, has had a significant impact on the growth and development of each player. Each player recognizes and is thankful for that.

"I think I've learned everything there is to learn about baseball from Jon Paino," said Betts, who has committed to play at Tennessee if the draft doesn't work out.

Molnar shared a story of one of the first times they played for Paino and the players were told that the first one to a position gets it. It instantly created an internal competition, one that carries on today.

"He lets us play out there," said Molnar, who has committed to UCLA. "Once you make a mistake he'll teach you how to correct it."

Paino deflects the praise and instead directs it to the parents. He emphasized that both sets of parents have made baseball important, but not the most important thing in their lives.

It is that kind of upbringing that has allowed Betts and Molnar to remain humble and grounded despite the attention heaped on them the last few years.

As Molnar put it, "being humble will get you a lot further in life."

Both players have attacked their final high school offseason differently. Betts lost 25 pounds by changing his diet and working out with Twins catcher Kurt Suzuki, a product of nearby Cal State Fullerton. Molnar stayed in shape by leading his high school basketball team to the playoffs.

For both, draft day will probably consist of time with family and close friends. There will also be a lot of texts between each other.

For Paino though, the scene will be a lot different.

"It will be an extremely happy day for me and my family," Paino said. "These kids have become a part of my family. I will be happy for them on the level that any parent is happy for their own son."

Les Lukach is a freelance writer in Los Angeles

NHSI Matchups Set

USA Baseball announced the 16-team field for the National High School Invitational, which will be held in March at the USA Baseball National Training Complex in Cary, N.C. The fourth annual event is a collection of many of the best high school baseball programs in the country.

Leesville Road High in Raleigh, N.C., will serve as the host of the tournament for the first time. The Pride finished 2014 with a 17-6 overall record and advanced to the second round of the 4-A state playoffs.

"The National High School Invitation continues to bring together some of the top programs and talents from around the U.S. for a one-of-a-kind high school baseball experience," Paul Seiler, USA Baseball's executive director/CEO, said in a release. "In just three years, the NHSI has quickly become the premier event on the high school baseball calendar and we are thrilled to partner with the Town of Cary, the Greater Raleigh Sports and our media partner, Baseball America, on the 2015 edition."

Other schools include: De Soto Central High in Southaven, Miss.; Loyalsock Township High in Williamsport, Pa.; and Puyallup (Wash.)



... while Betts says the two are always in sync, though their personalities are different

High. The states of Mississippi, Pennsylvania and Washington will be represented at the NHSI for the first time.

California will be well-represented again with four schools: College Park High in Pleasant Hill, Huntington Beach (Calif.) High, JSerra High in San Juan Capistrano and San Clemente High.

Three Florida schools will take part: Mosley High in Lynn Haven, St. Thomas Aquinas High in Fort Lauderdale and Trinity Prep in Winter Park. Rounding out the field are two schools from Georgia in Lambert High in Suwanee and Whitewater High in Fayetteville, as well as Horizon High in Scottsdale, Ariz.; Farragut High in Knoxville, Tenn., and College Station (Texas) High.

In the first round, the matchups are: Horizon High, Scottsdale, Ariz., facing Loyalsock Township High, Williamsport, Pa.; Huntington Beach (Calif.) High facing St. Thomas Aquinas High, Fort Lauderdale; Trinity Prep, Winter Park, Fla., against College Station (Texas) High; Puyallup (Wash.) High against Leesville Road High, Raleigh, N.C.; Mosley High, Lynn Haven, Fla., facing off against JSerra High, San Juan Capistrano, Calif.; DeSoto Central High, Southaven, Miss., facing off against Whitewater High in Fayetteville, Ga; San Clemente (Calif.) High against Lambert High and Farragut High in Knoxville, Tenn., vs. College Park High in Pleasant Hill, Calif.



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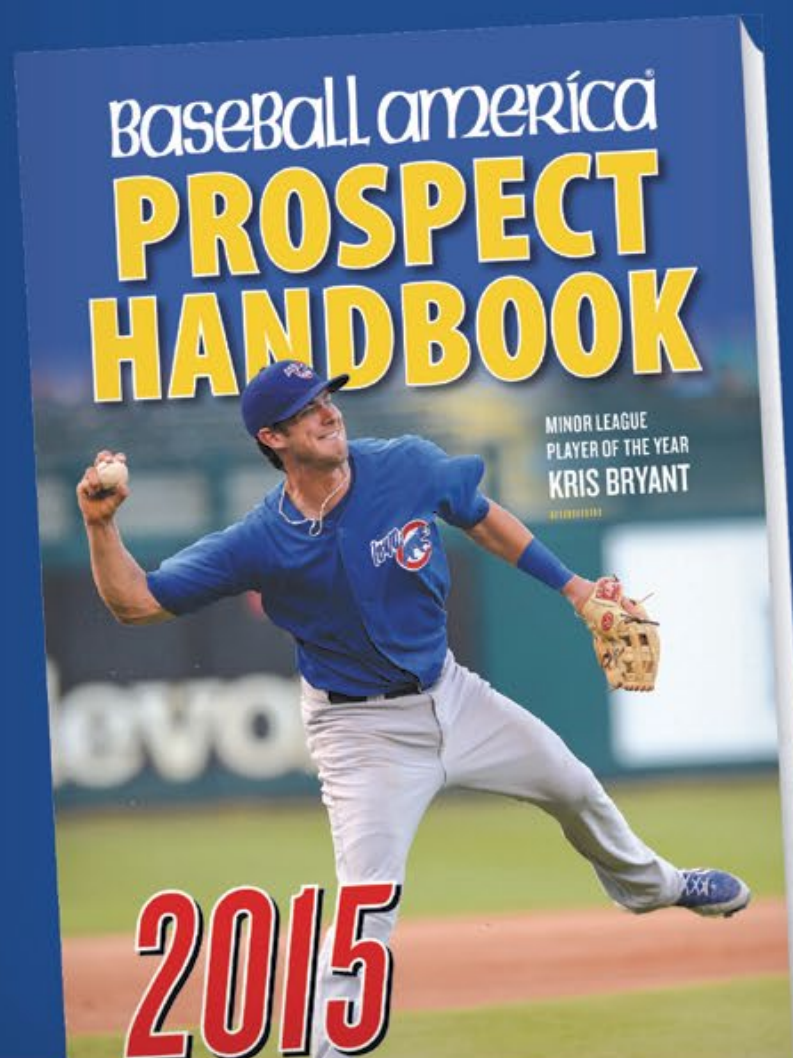
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Transactions

Transactions involving minor league players, i.e. those not on 40-man rosters, covering the period Feb. 6–19.

ATLANTA BRAVES: Signed RHPs **Matt Capps**, **Todd Coffey** and **Jose Veras** and OF **Eric Young Jr.** Released RHP **Joe Gardner**.

BALTIMORE ORIOLES: Signed 2B **Jayson Nix** and OF **Nolan Reimold**.

BOSTON RED SOX: Signed RHPs **Deryk Hooker** and **Jess Todd**.

CHICAGO CUBS: Signed SS **Ryan Dent**. Re-signed 2B **Jonathan Mota**.

CHICAGO WHITE SOX: Signed C **Sean O'Connell** and 3B **Nick Delmonico**.

CINCINNATI REDS: Signed RHPs **Daniel Cabrera** and **Kevin Gregg** and 3B **Chris Dominguez**.

CLEVELAND INDIANS: Signed LHP **Bruce Chen** and SS **Michael Martinez**.

COLORADO ROCKIES: Signed C **Aaron Munoz**.

DETROIT TIGERS: Signed OF **Casper Wells**.

HOUSTON ASTROS: Signed RHP **Roberto Hernandez**.

KANSAS CITY ROYALS: Signed RHPs **Joe Blanton** and **Derek Gordon**. Released 2B **Dalvis Ortiz**.

LOS ANGELES DODGERS: Signed RHP **Ramon Troncoso**, LHP **Dustin Richardson** and C **Ralph Henriquez**. Released RHP **Francisco Villa** and 2B **Alexis Aguilar**.

MIAMI MARLINS: Signed OF **Jervenski Johnson**. Re-signed OF **Reed Johnson**.

MILWAUKEE BREWERS: Signed RHPs **David Herndon** and **Josh Roenicke** and 2B **Donnie Murphy**. Released 3B **Nick Delmonico**.

NEW YORK YANKEES: Signed RHP **Kyle Davies**.

OAKLAND ATHLETICS: Signed RHP **Brandon Kloess** and LHP **Barry Zito**.

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES: Signed RHP **Jairo Munoz**.

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS: Signed RHP **Pedro Echemendia**.

SAN DIEGO PADRES: Signed RHP **Parker Frazier**, 3B **Josh Bell** and OF **Kenard Jones**.

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS: Signed RHPs **Melvin Adon**, **Fernando Cabrera** and **Robert Coello** and LHP **Clay Rapada**. Re-signed 2B **Skyler Stromsmoe**. Released C **Drew Stiner**.

SEATTLE MARINERS: Signed LHP **Rafael Perez**.

TAMPA BAY RAYS: Signed LHP **Everett Teaford** and 2B **Jake Elmore**. Released 3B **Leopoldo Correa**.

TEXAS RANGERS: Signed RHP **Jamey Wright**.

TORONTO BLUE JAYS: Signed OF **Juan Puello**.

Obituaries

Daniel Anderson, who pitched two years in the minor leagues in 1951–'52, died Aug. 19, 2014, in Stanton, Iowa. He was 80.

Julio Aramini, who pitched one season of pro ball in 1952, died Aug. 22, 2014. He was 81.

William Boesch, who played one season of pro ball in 1949, died April 13, 2014, in Belleville, Ill. He was 83.

Ty Brazier, an outfielder who played 11 years in the minors from 1947–55 and 1957–58, died June 18, 2014, in Florida. He was 86.

Jerome Coleman, an outfielder who played four seasons from 1981–84, died March 31, 2014, in LaGrange, Ga. He was 55.

Al Curtis, a righthander who pitched eight years in the minors from 1951–58, died Aug. 31, 2014, in Gaffney, S.C. He was 84.

Charles "Whammy" Douglas, a righthander who pitched one season in the major leagues, died Nov. 16, 2014, in Richlands, N.C. He was 79. Douglas had a 10-year pro career, starting when he was 18, but his only time in the majors came at age 22 in 1957. He appeared in 11 games, including eight starts, for the Pirates after being called up that July and went 3–3, 3.26 in 47 innings.

Ed Fetzner, a righthander who pitched in the minors in 1950 and '53, died May 11, 2014. He was 84.

Luis Garcia, a third baseman who played 18 seasons of pro ball from 1949–66, died Jan. 9, 2014, in Venezuela. He was 84.

Bill Getz, a righthander who pitched four seasons of pro ball from 1955–58, died Jan. 7, 2014. He was 81.

Don Grate, a righthander who pitched in two big league seasons from 1945–46, died Nov. 22, 2014, in Miami Gardens, Fla. He was 91. Grate had a long pro career but only got a few cups of coffee in the majors, appearing in four games, including two starts, for the Phillies in 1945 and

three games in 1946. He logged 16 innings in the majors and went 1–1, 9.37. He continued playing the minors through 1957, along the way converting from pitching to hitting, and also pursued a career in pro basketball. He appeared in two games for Sheboygan of the NBA in 1949.

Bob Gregg, a lefthander who pitched four years in the minors from 1949–50 and 1953–54, died Aug. 24, 2014, in San Angelo, Texas. He was 84.

Ron "Whitey" Hafner, a catcher who played four seasons in the pros between 1958 and '62, died April 4, 2014, in Toledo. He was 76.

Peter Handrinos, who authored five books about baseball, died Aug. 21, 2014, in Norwalk, Conn. He was 42.

Robert Hantranft, who pitched in the minors in 1948 and '50, died Jan. 16, 2014, in Myerstown, Pa. He was 85.

Jerry Hinman, a righthander who pitched two years in the minors from 1957–58, died Aug. 26, 2014, in Troy, N.Y. He was 76.

Bob Horne, who played two seasons in the minors in 1951 and '56, died June 19, 2014, in Florida. He was 82.

Russ Kemmerer, a righthander who pitched in nine big league seasons between 1954–63, died Dec. 8, 2014, in Indianapolis. He was 84.

Kemmerer pitched in the majors with four different clubs, working as a starter in the first half of his career before shifting to being primarily a reliever over his final four years. He came up with the Red Sox in 1954 and pitched well as a rookie, going 5–3, 3.82 over 75 innings split between starting and relieving. However, he struggled in 1955 and was sent back to the minors, not reappearing until 1957 and subsequently being traded to the Washington Senators. He twice logged 200-inning seasons with Washington and had his best year as a starter there in 1959, winning eight games with a 4.50 ERA.

Sold to the White Sox in May 1960, Kemmerer shifted to the bullpen and had his best run as a big leaguer, going 6–3, 2.98 over 36 appearances for Chicago over the rest of the '60 season. He went on to make 103 appearances, all but four of them in relief, over the next two seasons, and finished out his career with the Houston Colt .45's in 1963.

Charlie Lodes, who played one year in the minor leagues in 1961, died Aug. 27, 2014, in Oklahoma City. He was 72.

Lynn McKinney, a righthander who pitched professionally from 1973–79, died Aug. 20, 2014, in Spokane, Wash. He was 63.

Don Musto, an outfielder who played five seasons of pro ball from 1953–57, died Jan. 11, 2014, in Benicia, Calif. He was 79.

Tom Naughton, who pitched one year in the minor leagues in 1954, died Aug. 26, 2014, in Maywood, N.J. He was 83.

Deni Pacini, a former scout for the Angels, Dodgers, Marlins and Pirates, died July 11, 2014, in Kerman, Calif. He was 81.

William Parmer, a righthander who pitched in the minors in 1942 and '46, died Jan. 27, 2014, in Tenafly, N.J. He was 94.

Herb Plews, a second baseman who played four years in the majors from 1956–59, died Dec. 12, 2014, in Boulder, Colo. He was 86.

Plews, a defense-oriented infielder, played 11 years of pro ball and was a semi-regular in the Washington Senators' lineup from 1956–58. He got to the majors as a 28-year-old in 1956 and hit .270 with one homer in 256 at-bats for the Senators. He continued seeing time at second base, third base and shortstop over the next two seasons, batting .271 in 1957 and .258 in 1958. The Senators traded him to the Red Sox in June 1959, but he played in just 13 games for Boston before being sent to the minors. He continued playing through 1965 but never got back to the big leagues.

Larry Porto, a minor league umpire for two years from 1951–52, died Feb. 1, 2014, in Cheshire, Conn. He was 92.

Jean-Pierre Roy, a righthander who pitched one season in the majors, died Oct. 31, 2014, in Pompano Beach, Fla. He was 94.

The Montreal native played 12 seasons in the minors, reaching the big leagues briefly in 1946. He pitched in three games, making one start, for the Brooklyn Dodgers and recorded a 9.95 ERA in six innings without figuring in any decisions.

Willie Sheelor, who played in the Negro Leagues from 1952–55, died June 12, 2014, in Concord, N.C. He was 86.

Bill Thompson, a first baseman who played professionally for 10 seasons from 1953–62, died June 18, 2014, in Cabot, Pa. He was 82.

Bob Usher, an outfielder who played in six big league seasons between 1946–57, died Dec. 29, 2014, in San Jose. He was 89.

Usher reached the majors as a 21-year-old with the Reds in 1946, appearing in 92 games and hitting .204 over 152 at-bats. His next meaningful big league experience didn't come until 1950, when he had a career-high 321 at-bats and hit .259 with six homers. The Reds traded him to the Cubs after the 1951 season, but he spent most of the next several seasons in the minors. After not playing in the majors at all from 1953–56, Usher returned with the Indians in 1957. He split that season between the Indians and Washington Senators, batting .257 in 106 games. He played one more season in the minors before closing out his career, having appeared in 428 big league games.

Bob Weilep, a righthander who pitched professionally from 1954–55, died Dec. 21, 2013. He was 79.

Dick Wernert, a righthander who pitched one year of pro ball in 1946, died Aug. 25, 2014, in Tucson. He was 90.

Lloyd Willison, a lefthander who pitched three years in the minors from 1947–49, died Jan. 27, 2014, in Zanesville, Ohio. He was 84.

Obituary information provided by SABR. Information for minor league obituaries may be emailed to BaseballNecrology@gmail.com.

Who won (and lost) the offseason?



CLEARWATER, FLA.

Whew. What an offseason. Give us a second while we catch our breath and try to digest what just happened.

Did the Padres trade for every available outfielder except Dave Winfield? Was the most humongous contract in professional sports history really handed out by the Marlins? Did the Orioles nearly trade their general manager? Did James Shields take longer to find a home than the "Beverly Hills Chihuahua?"

Well, we polled 35 team officials from around baseball. Here are the results:

Most Improved Teams (NL)

Padres 29 votes, Cubs 11, Marlins 11, Nationals 4

We're getting a little worried about new Padres GM A.J. Preller. He hasn't made a deal in the past half-hour. After a winter in which he pulled off seven trades (three of which brought a whole new outfield—in the same week), signed four free agents (including Shields) and reeled in a bunch of other free agents on minor league deals (including long-lost Jose Valverde), that's a shocker. That said, there are still questions about whether the Padres have the sort of outfield defense, infield star power and lineup balance to win the National League West. But Preller's peers were amazed by the breadth of this astonishing overhaul by a first-year GM. One American League executive voted in exactly one category in this poll (this one) just so he could say of this club: "In my baseball life, I've never seen a team make such a monumental improvement as the Padres did this offseason."

Most Improved Teams (AL)

White Sox 26, Red Sox 14, Blue Jays 9, Mariners 4

If you watched White Sox GM Rick Hahn at work this winter, you could almost see him checking off boxes on his offseason wish list: top-of-the-rotation starter—Jeff Samardzija (check). Closer—David Robertson (check). Left fielder—Melky Cabrera (check). First baseman/DH to ease the load on Jose Abreu—Adam LaRoche (check). Lefthanded reliever—Zach Duke (check). Super utility men—Emilio Bonifacio and Gordon Beckham (check).

Now that the transaction dust has settled, this team is way better than the 89-loss outfit of 2014. But how much better? It was incredible, on one hand, to see a team get this many most-improved votes and still, on the other hand, hear so many concerns expressed by the people voting for it—over depth in general, pitching depth in particular and the challenge of making all these pieces mesh. "So they're certainly better," one AL exec said. "I just don't know what to expect."

Most Unimproved Teams (NL)

Phillies 20, Braves 12, Rockies 7, Giants 6, Brewers 5, Reds 4

As you can see, there was no shortage of teams to vote for in this prestigious category. But it tells you all you need to know



The Nationals landed another ace in free agent Max Scherzer, but they will be paying the price for years and years to come

about the state of the once-mighty Phillies that they were still a runaway winner. Of course, as one NL exec observed, they're "intentionally" not improving because they've finally admitted it's time to join the cast of "Extreme Makeover." But there was also a wave of sentiment that they didn't accomplish nearly as much as they could have and should have this winter. They'd be a lot better off by now, one AL exec said, if they'd moved virtually all their veterans just to get that page turned. Instead, he said, "they treaded water."

Most Unimproved Teams (AL)

Rays 12, Orioles 10, A's 7, Tigers 7, Rangers 5, Royals 4

What a free-for-all this category was. The Rays retooled, waved adios to manager Joe Maddon and GM Andrew Friedman, and took what many voters viewed as a temporary step backward in the name of long-term success. The Oakland reboot was so confusing the A's got multiple votes in both the most-improved and most-unimproved portions of the poll. The Orioles got a bunch of these votes and are still seen as a team that could win the AL East if Manny Machado and Matt Wieters are pictures of health. The Tigers are on this list even though nobody would be shocked if they won the World Series. Given that 10 of 15 teams got at least one vote, we get the impression nobody has any division in the AL figured out.

Best Free Agent Signings

Russell Martin (Blue Jays) 11, James Shields (Padres) 11, Jon

USELESS INFORMATION DEPT.

TRIVIALITY

It's only trivial if you don't know the answer.

Since 2008, Russell Martin has caught 37 postseason games. Only two catchers in baseball have caught more. Can you name them?

» **OVER THE TOP:** Max Scherzer also won the most outrageous contract, and has fired up the industry like no deal (non-A-Rod) since possibly the **Kevin Brown** contract. One exec called this one "a **Bobby Bonilla** joke waiting to happen." With all due respect to Bonilla, who will make nearly \$1.2 million a year from the Mets until he's 72, Scherzer still has him beat. He'll get \$15 million a year through 2028. "And no matter how you look at how that devalues the present-day value of the deal," the same exec said, "that's just amazing. Even if he's great for four years and then declines, that's 10 more years you're still paying him \$15 million. That's incredible."

.....
TRIVIALITY ANSWER: Yadier Molina (55), Carlos Ruiz (43).

Lester (Cubs) 8, Adam LaRoche (White Sox) 7

The votes in this sector of the survey zigzagged in all directions, with 33 different players collecting at least one vote—including two Cubans (Yoan Moncada and Hector Olivera) who haven't even signed yet. Oh, and one fellow who isn't a player at all—Joe Maddon—got two votes. So what pushed Martin and Shields to the top of this list? Well, there weren't a lot of fans of Martin's five-year, \$82 million contract, per se. But "he impacts winning," one voter said. Shields' votes were reflections of both his contract (because the Padres were able to keep it to four years) and the way he fits both his new ballpark and the aggressive winter of his new club. They "had to sign him," an AL exec said, "to finish off the project."

Worst Free Agent Signings

Max Scherzer (Nationals) 15, Brett Anderson (Dodgers) 10, Hanley Ramirez (Red Sox) 9, Michael Cuddyer (Mets) 8, Nick Markakis (Braves) 6, Billy Butler (A's) 5, Brandon McCarthy (Dodgers) 5

When we asked one NL executive for his selections in the best free agent competition, his instant quip was: "That's an oxymoron." No wonder the votes piled up for all sorts of candidates on this side of the poll. We counted 14 free agents who got at least three votes for worst signing and another nine who got two votes. But the most fun fact of all is 17 different players got votes in both the worst-signing and best-signing categories. The reason for that isn't actually confusing. We'd sum it up this way: Love the player, hate the contract. There's no better example of that than Scherzer.

"It's ridiculous that they'll be paying him forever," one voter said. "But he's a great pitcher."

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